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Thesis/Project

THE SLATE PROJECT:
REIMAGINING CHURCH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BY

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Abstract

This thesis asks the question, “What if we had a clean slate for being the church?” I start with my own personal story of longing for a different experience of church that reflects my deeply held beliefs regarding the relationships of Love the church is called to embody. Then from the context of the Slate Project, an alternative Christian community I co-founded, I reflect theologically on what this community has discerned to be the core elements, or “slate,” required for being church in the twenty-first century. I propose by centering their identity and purpose in these core elements other individuals and churches may benefit from discerning their own answer to this question in their own particular contexts with the goal of reimagining and remembering what it means to be the church today.

Given my theological position that the church discerns who the church is called to be based on who the church understands God to be— in and through its relationship with God—I ground my ecclesiological inquiry in a christology of multiplicity and a relational trinitarian theology. The christological characteristics of Christ as Liberator, Subvertor, Interconnected and Vulnerable are explored in their role as determinative for the ecclesiological identity of the Slate Project community in particular and the twenty-first century American church more generally. The importance of a relational theology of multiplicity and its influence on what it means to be the church is highlighted in a section on the Trinity.

The Slate Project community's experience of discerning, identifying, and reimagining the core elements of the slate are characterized by our practice of prayer, engagement with Holy Scripture, participation in the Holy Eucharist and the living out of the baptismal covenant. The theological concept of grace is explored as the key to what makes being church with a clean slate both possible and necessary.

Finally, a process for discerning what it means to be church with a clean slate is offered, focusing on both the spiral nature of the process and the necessity to ground both the discernment process and ecclesial identity in a theology of resurrection.

Dedication

To the Slate Project community, both online and face-to-face.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One A Movement to Reimagine the Church	13
A Larger Conversation about the Church	13
Imagining Church with a Clean Slate	16
The Core of the Slate	22
Chapter Two Christological Multiplicity and the Trinity	25
A Framework of Love.....	25
A Christology of Multiplicity	28
<i>Christ as Subvertor</i>	35
<i>Christ as Interconnected</i>	39
<i>Christ as Vulnerable</i>	42
Trinitarian Theology	47
Shared Leadership and the Trinity	50
Chapter Three The Core Elements of the Slate	
Prayer	53
Scripture.....	61
Holy Eucharist	65
The Baptismal Covenant.....	71
Chapter Four The Clean Slate as Grace	82
Letting Go or “Wiping the Slate Clean”	86
Practicing Grace.....	90
Chapter Five Looking Back, Looking Forward	93
The Discernment Process Goes On.....	93
Death and New Life	98

Conclusion	103
Bibliography	106

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Introduction

To be alive now, during the twenty-first century, is to live in a world that is changing rapidly, requiring innovation and new ways of thinking in every area of life. The Christian church is no exception. For many people, traditional forms of parish life, liturgy, worship, and community engagement continue to provide spiritual nourishment and life-giving relationships with others in their journey to follow Christ, as they have for previous decades and centuries. However, an increasing number of people are choosing not to engage with “traditional” churches that provide these types of experiences. The reasons for this disengagement are as vast and varied as the number of people who are extremely unlikely to darken the doors of any traditional church.

Our twenty-first century American culture is influenced by a myriad of factors including “globalization, economic displacement, unsustainable environmental destruction, religious conflict, terrorism, and major waves of global migration.”¹ As the United States continues to become more and more divided politically, economically, socially, morally, and religiously, people with differing beliefs and opinions continue to separate themselves from one another, choosing instead to surround themselves with those who are like-minded, in effect creating a “new tribalism.”² Public trust in government, institutions, and even in our fellow Americans is incredibly low and this lack of trust extends to religious institutions like the church. A 2016 Gallup poll showed

¹ Dwight J. Zscheile, *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), 40.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

that American's confidence in organized religion was at a record low at 41%, dropping eleven percentage points in ten years.³

An extensive survey of more than 35,000 U.S. adults conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015 found that the percentages of people who say they believe in God, pray daily, and regularly attend church or other religious services have all declined in recent years.⁴ In other words, the traditional markers for determining whether a person is "religious" are showing the number of self-identified practicing Christians to be steadily decreasing.

A growing share of Americans are religiously unaffiliated, including some who self-identify as atheists or agnostics as well as many who describe their religion as "nothing in particular." Altogether, the religiously unaffiliated (also called the "nones") now account for 23% of the adult population, up from 16% in 2007.⁵

Not only are the numbers of people who attend church every Sunday decreasing, the negative perceptions regarding those who identify as Christians are increasing. In her book *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, Diana Butler Bass paints a troublesome picture of how many view American Christianity: "By 2010, the polling data reflected that to be 'religious' you reject a transcendent and open faith, are afraid to ask questions about the Bible, Jesus, or the creeds, turn your back on the planet, oppose women's rights, and dislike gays and lesbians, the poor, and immigrants."⁶ In the larger cultural landscape of the United States,

³ "Americans' Confidence in Institutions Stays Low," Gallup, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/192581/americans-confidence-institutions-stays-low.aspx>.

⁴ "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," Pew Research Center, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 234.

being a “Christian” or a member of a “church” has become synonymous with being intolerant, homophobic, and ultimately, irrelevant to twenty-first-century American life.⁷ In 2016 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights issued a report, *Peaceful Coexistence: Reconciling Nondiscrimination Principles with Civil Liberties*, in which the Commission’s chair, Martin Castro argued that certain Christian phrases were actually coded language for discrimination: “The phrases ‘religious liberty’ and ‘religious freedom’ will stand for nothing except hypocrisy so long as they remain code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Christian supremacy, or any form of intolerance.”⁸

While traditional churches struggle with these negative perceptions, there remain many people who describe themselves as possessing a discernable spiritual hunger and who continue to seek meaning, purpose, and authentic experiences of community with the hope of making a positive difference in the world. They are simply not participating in traditional churches in order to meet those needs. The majority of those surveyed by the Pew Forum who self-identify as having no religious affiliation, say they believe in God.⁹ The study suggests while perhaps becoming less religious, in some ways Americans are becoming more spiritual.¹⁰ About six in ten adults (up seven percentage points since 2007) say they regularly feel both a deep sense of “spiritual peace and well-

⁷ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2007), 25.

⁸ Emma Green, “Even the Government’s Smartest Lawyers Can’t Figure Out Religious Liberty,” *The Atlantic*, September 14, 2016, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/us-commission-civil-rights-religious-liberty-report/499874/>

⁹ Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

being” and a “wonder about the universe.”¹¹ My own experience has been that many people are seeking deeper connections with God and their fellow human beings, but many are seeking these relational spiritual connections outside of the institutional church.

The church did not always have such an undesirable reputation. Before the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 C.E., the church had a much more ambiguous relationship with government and empire. Many Christians were martyred due to their refusal to renounce their beliefs and participate in the Roman civic cult. The early church was known for its alternative economy where all things were held in common and all members of the community were cared for. Following the way of Jesus the Christ meant crossing all boundaries and transcending tribal identities. But once the church was sanctioned by the empire, this emphasis was lost and rather than a destabilizing force against the status quo, the church often became a legitimizing force for those in power.

“This tight, symbiotic relationship between church and state prevailed for centuries,” says Dwight Zscheile, “up into the modern era.”¹² The church’s mission became thoroughly intertwined with the cultivation and preservation of Western culture through the means of colonialism. “Christianizing” and “civilizing” the indigenous populations of the world became synonymous.¹³ Throughout its history the church demonstrated time and again its willingness to sanctify the use of violence to “spread the gospel,” which in reality resulted in the eradication of peoples and cultures deemed “other” and therefore expendable. By hitching its wagon to the political, economic and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 18.

¹³ Ibid.

cultural powers that be, the church lost a great deal of its credibility as a subvertor of worldly powers and a community of peace that cares for the other and the outcast. The church's failure even to be honest and "truthful about the ways in which we have used God to justify our prejudices and agendas"¹⁴ has added insult to injury.

While the world has changed rapidly over the last century, in many ways the institutional church has not. The church's leadership and organizational structures that were developed between the seventeenth century and early twentieth century are floundering and some would say failing to function in today's world. The theological architecture that has supported the dominant framework of Christendom is showing its age, cracking and crumbling over the last fifty to one hundred years. Students of Christian history should not be surprised that we are experiencing what Phyllis Tickle calls the "Great Emergence" at this time in our history.¹⁵ In her book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Tickle describes how Western culture and those parts of the world that have been colonized by it experience enormous cycles of upheaval and reconfiguration of its parts roughly every five hundred years.¹⁶ According to Tickle, we are experiencing such a time of upheaval now. In other words, the American church in the twenty-first century is in the midst of our own "giant rummage sale,"¹⁷ a key aspect of which is the discerning of which elements from the past

¹⁴ Jeffery C. Pugh, *Entertaining the Triune Mystery: God, Science, and the Space Between* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 112.

¹⁵ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

are important enough to keep and reimagine for our future, and which elements no longer serve their intended purpose and, therefore, should be let go.

This image of a giant rummage sale has caught hold of the imaginations of many people in the church and proven quite helpful, not only in describing what we are currently experiencing, but also in reminding us we have been here before—mainly, that this is not the first time we have lived through periods of great change, hope, frustration, and unknowns. In Diana Butler Bass’s view, the church is living through “the end of the beginning” of our current 500-year cycle right now.¹⁸ While the current cycle may have familiar aspects to cycles of the past, the current state of the church in the United States is unlike anything we have seen before. Parallels have been drawn between the church today and the early church of the first century and while there are useful reasons to look to the early church to discern our way forward, there are also dangers of simply trying to recreate what was, particularly because, as many have argued, the age of Christendom is now over. The plates have shifted and the cultural underpinnings that had supported Christendom have been swept away.¹⁹

The last fifty years have seen major cultural disestablishments of the so-called “mainline” Protestant denominations. A myriad of forces, such as globalization, postmodernism, technology, the world economy, science, etc., have pushed the church out of its comfortable and lauded position in the center of American culture and moved it out to the fringes. Many Christians are grieving and fighting against this loss, while

¹⁸ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 7.

¹⁹ Phil Snider, “Why Luthermergent? Because We Always Have Been and Better Be Now and Forevermore, or We Probably Aren’t Really Lutheran,” in *The Hyphenateds: How Emergence Christianity is Re-Traditioning Mainline Practice*, ed. Phil Snider (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2011), 40.

others argue that this return to the margins is *exactly* what the church needs. I stand with those who believe the latter.

Since the 1970s there has been a movement within the wider church hoping to provide a “word of instruction as to what the Church is to be” in this new age.²⁰ We are now finally coming to the end of the beginning of that movement, where a critical mass of people in the church have prioritized and committed themselves to deeply engaging in this conversation about what the church is called to be moving forward into the twenty-first century. Tickle describes how this movement began:

It was a slow process at first; and it certainly was an unintentional and unselfconscious one. It was just people—people swapping stories and habits, people admiring the ways of some other people whom they liked, people curious and able now to ask without offense. And more than anything else, it was people finding deep within themselves an empty spot or some niggling hunger or a restive, questioning impatience they had not experienced before, or at least had not been empowered to acknowledge before. So the swapping back and forth in public conversation and socializing went on.²¹

The “niggling hunger” Tickle describes is an apt description for the longing, dissatisfaction, and craving for something new I personally felt several years ago. While I did not want to leave the church, I longed for an experience of church that was radically different from the one I was having. Specifically, as an Episcopal priest, I wanted the church where I ministered to be more like the church *I needed and wanted to be a part of*. In other words, I wanted church to be a place where my relationships with others were rooted and grounded in love—where the “core” or the “heart” of Christian faith was not only preached but practiced: loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. I am not

²⁰ Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne, *The Emerging Church* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1970), 9.

²¹ Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 133.

saying this was never the case, but it was too often not the case. I was not looking for perfect community, but I was looking for authentic community.

I longed for an experience of community where I felt known and seen—understood and affirmed for who I was. I wanted honesty and transparency in my relationships with others. I wanted open and honest communication. I wanted support and authenticity. I wanted genuine, shared leadership. I wanted to be able to be courageous and vulnerable without fear of retribution or being shamed. I wanted all those things that, I assume, *everyone* wants from their experience of church. But it was more than just wanting them, I wanted to know *why they were not there*.

When I found the courage to share my longing, I confided in two clergy colleagues—the Rev. Jennifer DiFrancesco, an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), and the Rev. Jason Chesnut, an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)—who were experiencing similar struggles and frustrations in their ministry contexts. We began to name a shared feeling—that God was calling us, individually and then eventually together, to something new, something different—a different *way of being church*. We did not know exactly what that meant or what that would look like, but we knew that God was inviting us to join in creating a new expression of being church where our longings could find fulfillment. We wanted to connect and participate in the movement of reimagining what the church could be that was already taking place across the church. Bass describes this movement as characterized by

a generative spirit, a creative and innovative openness, a sense of hope-filled realism, of pragmatic idealism, of an interconnectedness of all things, of urgency and wonder, and experiencing the divine in the here and now.²²

Since Jason had been given the opportunity to start an ELCA mission from scratch, and Jenn and I were longing to do something completely new, we started by asking ourselves the question: “What if we had a clean slate for being church?”—because in essence, we did. Therefore, the first thing we needed to determine was “What constitutes a clean slate?” In other words, what were the core elements that would need to be a part of this “new thing” to make it qualify as being church? And how would we know what these essential requirements, or core elements, would be?

In this thesis, I argue that the church’s knowledge of who we are, or put another way, what it means to “be the church,” is predicated upon our understanding of who God is. We come to know who God is through our relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other, and all of creation. Through our own process of becoming church with a clean slate (which is necessarily, always, an ongoing process), the Slate Project discerned four specific ways we come to know who God is, and therefore who we are called to be as church, and refer to them “the core of the slate.” I have identified these core elements we discerned to be: prayer, engagement with Scripture, participation in Holy Eucharist and living out the baptismal covenant in community.

Through these four elements we come to know God as incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ and we come to know God as Trinity. However, in practice, as the Slate Project was discerning what it meant to be church with a clean slate, we started with who

²² Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 247.

we knew God to be. In this way we came to realize that we were not starting with a “blank” slate, nor would we want to be. Those of us who were discerning this new expression of church already had relationships with God through Jesus and the Trinity. It was through reflection and communal practice that we were able to identify the core elements that enable us to know who God is and therefore who we are called to be as church. In this thesis I reflect on our christological and trinitarian theologies before moving on to discuss the core elements of the slate, because this is the order we discerned them in community.

In Chapter One I introduce the Slate Project and place it within the larger conversation in the American church regarding reimagining church for the twenty-first century. In Chapter Two I explore how an understanding of Jesus Christ as God incarnate and God as Trinity is foundational for the church’s self-understanding. Specifically, I consider how the Slate Project has developed a Christology of multiplicity and a relational trinitarian theology to inform our ecclesiology by focusing on the christological characteristic of Christ as Liberator, Subvertor, Interconnected and Vulnerable. I also discuss how the relationality and mutuality of the Trinity can inform shared leadership in the church.

In Chapter Three I explore the each core element of the slate— prayer, engagement with Holy Scripture, the Holy Eucharist, and the baptismal covenant—in turn. In Chapter Four, I look more closely at the metaphor of the “clean slate” as a way to understand God’s grace and in the final chapter I describe a spiral process the Slate Project utilized for its own discernment, and offer it as a tool for other individuals and

churches to use in discerning how they themselves are being called by God to be church with a clean slate in their own contexts.

I write from my social location as a bisexual cis woman who is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church. My own theology is informed by liberation, queer, feminist, postcolonial, black, and womanist theologies. While I am committed to faithfully and truthfully representing the Slate Project community, the arguments made in this thesis are my own unless otherwise stated. I have done my best to tell the story of the Slate Project as I have experienced it. Therefore, if I have focused on certain elements of the Slate Project and less on others it is due to the limits of my own perspective and the limits of this thesis. And, while the movement to reimagine the church is happening all around the world, I will be focusing on the church in the United States, particularly the mainline Protestant church, because it is the context I know best.

I work from the assumption based on my experience and theological training that God is relational, as known and described in the doctrine of the Trinity. I work from the starting point that all people are in relationship with God by virtue of their identity as created beings. From this relational starting point, secured in their identity as the Beloved Body of Christ, a church community can then ask, “How is God calling *our community in particular* to participate in the co-creation of the reign of God and the building up of the Body of Christ?” It is my hope that this thesis will serve as a guide for other church communities who wish to discern for themselves how God may be calling them to reimagine who they are and discern what church with a clean slate might look like in their context.

This thesis is a twenty-first-century apologetic for a new way of being church that is actually very, very old. What I am offering here is not a new model for doing church, but a way for the church to remember who we are so we can discern who we are called to be. This project is both thoroughly theological and thoroughly practical. It requires a commitment to engaging in contemplation, action, and letting go. I hope other church communities will benefit from the Slate Project's story and from my perspective on the theological and ecclesiological work we have done together as we have endeavored to *be* church together. I offer both in the hopes that they may be useful tools for the wider church as we discern together how to be church in the twenty-first century. I believe every church community, not only those brand-new communities starting from scratch, can benefit from asking themselves this question and engaging in an intentional process of discernment to determine what the core of the slate is for them, and then, from that place of understanding the heart of their identity, discern who God is calling them to become.

Chapter One

A Movement to Reimagine the Church

A Larger Conversation about the Church

While the Slate Project seeks to engage with the larger conversation, in my estimation we do not fit neatly into any one category in terms of being “Emergent,” “Missional,” “Hyphenated” or any of the other designations describing communities who are non-traditional, yet part of a movement within the larger church to reimagine itself.²³ Because the Slate Project does not label ourselves with any of these markers, I will not be exploring them in depth in this thesis. Yet, as I said, we are conscious of being a part of a larger movement and that does form our self-understanding. We do not see ourselves as doing this reimagining work in isolation.

The overall decline of the institutional church has been a well documented and frequently studied topic for several years. Statistics citing the decline of the institution are offered repeatedly in books, articles, conversations, and even sermons, lamenting the current state of the church and our dismal future unless we can turn things around. Reason upon reason has been given for why more people are choosing not to go to church, including a decreased interest in and trust of institutions across the board and changing family values and practices, as well as a negative perception of organized religion in general and the church in particular.

²³ See Phyllis Tickle, *Emerging Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012); Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); Phil Snider ed., *The Hyphenateds: How Emergence Christianity is Re-Traditioning Mainline Practice*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2011).

At the same time, a movement of “holy discontent” has been rising within the church in resistance to the ways in which the church has failed to live out the gospel in ways others can see and recognize.²⁴ Many in this movement recognize that in order to move forward there are considerable historical injustices the church must acknowledge, repent of, and be healed from. As the former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori noted, “Human beings, limited creatures that we are, have erred and strayed and often attempted to do God’s work in ways that have caused pain and grief and ignored or actively subverted the dignity of others.”²⁵ Because of the countless ways those who practice Christianity has fallen short of its gospel message, using it instead as a coercive force to legitimize their own views, many have come to believe that the church is not worth their time or attention.

While there are many people who wish to follow the Way of Jesus Christ in the world today, loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves, our experience of church has not supported or facilitated this way of life. We have judged the church on the basis of its own teachings and find, in many ways, it comes up short.²⁶ In 2004, the Barna Group surveyed young adults (people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine) who were not members of churches how they viewed Christianity and Christians. The top answers were: “anti-homosexual,” “judgmental,” hypocritical,” and “out of touch with

²⁴ See Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008); Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

²⁵ Katharine Jefferts Schori, “The Episcopal Church: Forward into God’s Future,” in *What We Shall Become: The Future and Structure of the Episcopal Church*, ed. Winnie Varghese (New York: Church Publishing, 2013), 7.

²⁶ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 87.

reality.”²⁷ Additionally, the Barna Group found many of these same negative and skeptical opinions were also held by young adults *within* the church.²⁸

The irony is that as Christianity has continued to develop over the centuries, it has “carried within its own foundational narratives the seeds of critique” that have been necessary for the church’s continual self-critique as its faith and practice have evolved.²⁹ These seeds of critique have been nurtured and cultivated by internal movements throughout its history, challenging the church to review its practices and reimagine its theologies to better align with the gospel it proclaims.³⁰ The Slate Project is an effort to participate in the current movement of self-critique within the church, seeking to reclaim those foundational seeds within the church’s DNA and use them to reimagine what the church can be in our time and place.

While many are adamant this time of change, decline, and reimagining is *not* a time of death in the church, I disagree. We must look at this time in the church as a kind of death, for only through death can new life be found. Being church with a clean slate is about intentionally engaging in the death and resurrection cycle within the life of the church—letting go of certain elements, so that new ways of being church can be born. God is most certainly with us in this death, even leading us through it; therefore, there is hope and grace in this time. God is inviting us to participate in the co-creation of a new church for a new century. On the other side of a declining church is a transformed church—a new creation.

²⁷ Kinnaman and Lyons, *unChristian*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁹ Pugh, *The Matrix of Faith*, 184.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

One example of what must die are the ways many mainline churches in the United States have come to equate their identities as “church” with their worship (liturgy), their location (buildings), their success (how much money and people they have), their beliefs (doctrine), and their actions (anything from programs to polity to obeying their church’s teaching on morality). I would say these are false identities and it is these ways of understanding church that are currently crumbling to pieces. Perhaps as we clear away the rubble and engage in reimagining, we can, as Margaret Farley says, “excavate historical layers of meaning, find lost treasures, take account of historical and cultural contexts for church life, [and] hold on to gems of revelatory experience and shared faith”³¹ all at the same time. For those of us who look to the traditions of the church for sources of contemporary moral and theological insight, how do we reimagine what it means to be the church in the twenty-first century—what feminist’s call the “useable past?”³² As we rummage through all the church has collected along the way, how do we decide what stays and what goes?

Imagining Church with a Clean Slate

The Slate Project co-pastors made it our goal from the start to “retain the best of the institutional Church and meld it” as “seamlessly”³³ as possible with the newer elements we are reimagining. We are engaging in a practice Diana Butler Bass has termed “re-traditioning.”³⁴ Others have used the term “hyphenateds” to describe

³¹ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 187.

³² Ibid.

³³ Phyllis Tickle, “Forward,” in *The Hyphenateds: How Emergence Christianity is Re-Traditioning Mainline Practices*, ed. Phil Snider (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2011), xiv.

³⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004).

individuals and communities who are choosing to remain within our traditional denominations, while at the same time stepping out toward the future in the hopes of pushing our denominations towards growth and transformation.³⁵ As co-pastors, we have chosen to remain within our traditions and critique them from the inside—wrestling with our denominational identities rather than discarding them wholesale.

An important characteristics of the Slate Project is our desire to honor the tension that comes from being both bound to our traditions and free “to develop new frameworks for understanding that can move Christian theology forward.”³⁶ We are “attempting to faithfully appropriate” our “beloved traditions in new and innovating ways,”³⁷ standing in a long line of prophets who have called the church to new ways of life through living out the core of our ancient faith.

However, just because a way of being church is “ancient” does not make it good, right, or worthy of bringing into the future. Because the church’s history is complicated and complex, when we look to the past in order to discern our way forward, we must do so with great care and intentionality. When the beliefs and practices of a community no longer make sense in a particular context, the community must engage in a process of deciding what aspects of their theology they will retain and what they will not. Margaret Farley describes the process this way:

In a living tradition, beliefs and the theologies that interpret beliefs can be challenged by new experiences, cultural shifts, and new perspectives on the past. When this occurs, new and better rationales must be found to undergird ongoing beliefs, or beliefs themselves may evolve in their meaning and sometimes even be

³⁵ Phil Snider, ed., *The Hyphenateds: How Emergence Christianity is Re-Traditioning Mainline Practices* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2011).

³⁶ Ibid., xiv.

³⁷ Ibid.

replaced. What is no longer “seriously imaginable” as a genuine part of the tradition gives way to what is coherent with the deepest held truths of the community.³⁸

Those of us who are a part of the Slate Project have decided we are going to stick with the “project” of being church, because we believe the relationships inherent in being the church are worth maintaining. We believe this because we have experienced both personal and communal relationships with God through Jesus Christ. Through these relationships, God has given us the gift of grace and hence we, individually as Christians and communally as the church, possess a perpetual clean slate. The meaning of grace, here, is that God *always* gives us another chance. To paraphrase the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, who paraphrased the novelist Max Lucado: “God loves us just the way we are; but God doesn’t intend to leave us that way.”³⁹

When the Slate Project began in June of 2013, we did not know what to call ourselves. At the suggestion of a friend we chose the name “the Slate Project” as play on the metaphor of “a clean slate.” While it is possible to use the phrase clean slate and simply refer to a desire to do something new or unusual, the phrase can also refer to (1) a context involving relationship, (2) the presence of something in a relationship that needs to change, that is, something that needs to be “cleaned off the slate,” and (3) a fundamental underlying relationship of such importance that even though there is something that drastically needs to change, the relationship is still very much worth maintaining. This is how the Slate Project uses the phrase.

³⁸ Farley, *Just Love*, 187.

³⁹ The Rt. Rev. Michael B. Curry, “GO! We Are the Jesus Movement,” sermon at the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 3, 2015.

When we began this project, we three co-pastors had the opportunity to imagine what it would be like to start a new church completely from scratch. We quickly decided we would not, and in fact could not, choose to start with *nothing*; rather we would retain, or remember, and then reimagine the core elements of Christianity we believed necessary to constitute being a church. Yet, even after “wipe away” what we felt no longer useful, we would still be left with “a slate,” or a core understanding of what church is that has been formed and pressed together over time. Therefore, the question, “What if we had a clean slate for being the church?” was not a hypothetical one. Rather, it was an exercise in using our theological imaginations and claiming our ecclesiological inheritance. Posing and then reflecting on this question allowed us to get out of our own way, creating the psychological and emotional space to stop fixating on *what was not* or *could not be* and allowed us to *imagine what could be*.

Rather than rushing to start something, the three of us took time to discern together where and how God was calling us. In the midst of our “unknowing,” we met together faithfully every week for several hours at a time to read and study Scripture, to share the ideas we were having, and most importantly, to pray together. We created our own little “worship lab” where we experimented with different ways of praying and being together in God’s presence.

Though it may seem a truism, when we first asked each other, “What if we had a clean slate for being church?” (that is, “What do we want to take with us from what we already know of the Church and Christianity as we create our new community?”), our answer was: “Jesus.” Clearly Jesus must be at the heart of any new expression of church.

However, what exactly it means for Jesus to be the heart, or core, of what it means to be church is not clear. It has never been clear. Deciding that Jesus would be at the center of our new church was easy. Determining what exactly that would mean would be the work of the Slate Project.

At this point I would like to describe the Slate Project in a bit more detail. We have come to refer to ourselves as an alternative Christian community that gathers both online and face-to-face in Baltimore, Maryland. We describe ourselves as being a part of the radical Jesus movement, working to reimagine the church from the inside out.⁴⁰ The “Who We Are” section of our website outlines the co-pastors’ initial thoughts and declarations regarding what our new community’s mission and vision would be, asserting: “We are all about ‘Christianity without the crap’ and getting back to the ‘basics’” of being the church.⁴¹ This section goes on to say:

We care less about agreeing on doctrine and dogma, and more about helping each other follow Jesus in our everyday lives. A big part of our project is “self-critique” of our church institutions, theologies, and practices. We know there is a lot that needs to be “cleaned off the slate”—like all the ways racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, xenophobia, colonialism, patriarchy, disrespect for other religions, and a bunch of other bad stuff—have been a part of the structures of the church and the way we relate to one another. This doesn't happen overnight. We are committed to the conversations and conversions it will take to lament and repent of these sins, as well as the hard slow work of reconciliation and restoration that God's justice requires.⁴²

Originally the Slate Project began as a mission of the Delaware-Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with Jason Chesnut as its Mission Developer (and sole paid clergyperson). Over our four-year existence, we have garnered

⁴⁰ “Home,” Slate Project, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://www.slateproject.org>.

⁴¹ “Who We Are,” Slate Project, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://www.slateproject.org/who-we-arewhat-we-do.html>

⁴² Ibid.

official support from the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, the Presbytery of Baltimore, and the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church in the form of a three-year First Mark of Mission Grant awarded in 2016.

While the Slate Project does not have “members” like more traditional congregations, we refer to people who engage with us either online or face-to-face as “co-con[Spirit]ors.” Throughout the week we offer several ways for people to engage with our community. While our face-to-face gatherings are more easily recognizable as church activities, we firmly believe that our engagement with people online is also legitimate participation in a church community. Since doing church online is such a new concept and a new experience for so many people, including us, we have intentionally practiced claiming what we do online as “church” in order to begin to shift the paradigm of what it means to be church to include digital gathering spaces and online interactions.

Our equivalent of a weekly worship service is a dinner church gathering called “BreakingBread” which happens on Monday nights at 6 PM in a space we borrow from the Episcopal Cathedral of the Incarnation. During this time gathered face-to-face we break bread, share a meal, pray together, teach each other, and talk about our experiences where faith meets real life. On Wednesday mornings, we have our weekly Bible study called “WakeUpWordUp.” We migrate to different minority-owned coffee shops around the city that are within walking distance or easily accessible for our co-con[Spirit]ors who are without consistent access to housing or food.

The aspect of our ministry that has developed the largest reach (in terms of numbers of people from around the world) is a conversation we host on Twitter called

#SlateSpeak. Every Thursday, beginning at 9 PM EST, we have church online in real time. When I speak more about the elements of the slate in Chapter Three I will discuss how I believe we practice three of the core elements of being church (prayer, engaging with Scripture and a shared commitment to living into the Baptismal Covenant) during #SlateSpeak, and therefore, why it constitutes church. By following the hashtag people from all over the world not only participate in an edgy, progressive Christian tweet chat, they participate in the Body of Christ gathering in virtual space.

The very first method for engaging people the Slate Project utilized were videos Jason created and posted to our YouTube page. Because he had been “parachuted” in to Baltimore and did not know anyone, this was one way he could start ministering to and building relationships with people almost immediately. We continue to create video content on a weekly basis and currently we have 471 people subscribed to our YouTube page and over 141,542 views.⁴³ Other examples of our weekly digital content include a blog we curate on Mondays called #JesusCoffee; informational memes we create that teach little known facts about Christianity called #YoureWelcomeWednesdays⁴⁴; memes portraying quotes from Christian figures over the ages for #TBT or #ThrowBackThursday; and #[Slate Project]Saturdays where we post either a video Jason has created or a podcast he has done with one of our co-con[SPIRIT]ors, Tracy Radosevic. These are just a few examples of the ongoing ministries of the Slate Project.

The Core of the Slate

⁴³ “slateprojectbmore,” YouTube, accessed April 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/user/slateprojectbmore>.

⁴⁴ We lovingly borrowed this idea from Ellen DeGeneres.

The process of discerning what the core of our slate would be happened over time. However, I first came across what would become our four core elements in a book by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams entitled *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*. Williams took on a project very similar to the Slate Project's in that he is surveying the course of the church's existence, looking for the essence of what Christianity is all about. Below he describes his basis for engaging in his own remembering and reimagining project, as well as his ultimate findings.

It is all very well to talk about finding yourself in God's story, about reflecting and imagining; but, as we do all that, how can we decide what a good or bad interpretation of that story might be like? What criteria do we have to discern truth from falsehood? The Christian answer is, unsurprisingly, in terms of Jesus Christ. As Christians read the Bible, the story converges on Jesus. The full meaning of what has gone before is laid bare in Jesus. The agenda for what follows is set in Jesus. And, without trying to undermine or ignore the integrity of Jewish Scripture in itself . . . the Christian is bound to say that he or she can only really read those Jewish Scriptures as moving towards the point at which a new depth of meaning is laid bare in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁵

For Williams, the core elements that are "laid bare" in Jesus are what he calls "the four most obvious" essential elements of Christianity: "baptism, Bible, Eucharist, and prayer."⁴⁶ His overall argument is that while "there is a huge and bewildering variety in Christian thinking and practice about all kinds of things. . . these four basic activities have remained constant and indispensable for the majority of those who call themselves Christian."⁴⁷ The Slate Project did not choose our four core elements to match Archbishop Williams, although it is rather comforting for the more traditional among us to be in line with the thinking of such a well-recognized church authority. I identified prayer,

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 34-35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

engagement with Scripture, participation in Holy Eucharist, and living out the baptismal covenant to be the core elements of the Slate Project's "slate" because they are the very means by which we created, or co-created, our community. While the order is not crucial, I have ordered them in this way to follow the chronological order in which we engaged them as a community.

If the question were simply, "Why Church?" our answer, as well as Williams' would be, "Because Jesus." Jesus is the heart, or core, of the slate. It is this simple and yet it quickly becomes incredibly complicated. Because as soon as we have determined that Jesus is the core of our clean slate, we must begin to attend to the means by which we come to know *who Jesus is*. This is where the question of authority becomes explicit.

My own Episcopal and Anglican tradition(s) comes to know who Jesus is by drawing on the three-fold source of authority found in Richard Hooker's three-legged stool: Scripture, tradition, and reason. These sources of authority hold similar weight in the traditions of my co-pastors. When we began to practice together our search for Jesus, these were the means we engaged. Yet we needed to thoughtfully consider and affirm, if possible, *why* our traditions use these means to know God before we accepted them as worthy of continual use. We had to ask ourselves: "As we remember and reimagine what it means to be church, where will we place ultimate authority?" We were inclined to place ultimate authority with Jesus and with God, but this again led us to the question, "How do we know who God is?" Before we could discern what core elements would constitute the slate, we had to discern who we communally understood God to be.

Chapter Two

Christological Multiplicity and the Trinity

A Framework of Love

In our quest to determine how to be church with a clean slate, the Slate Project established that Jesus must be at the heart of any new expression of church. However, what exactly it means for Jesus to be the heart, or the core, of the church is not inherently clear. It has never been inherently clear, but rather has always been a matter of ongoing discernment. Determining that Jesus would be at the center of our new church was the easy part. Discerning what exactly that would mean has been the focus of our project.

Even amongst the three co-pastors, we each had our own differing christologies and theologies we brought to the table. To create a community that was not bound by denominational or traditional affiliations, we needed to create a space where a multiplicity of christologies and theologies were welcome. Within the universal church there are multiple christologies—this is a fact. But is every christology theologically acceptable, and if not, what is our criteria for determining which christologies are permissible? In other words, what is our criteria or framework for understanding who God is?

As we began to pray and engage with scripture together, it became clear that our relationships with one another and our relationships (individually and collectively) with God were directly forming and informing our experience of God and who we were discerning God to be calling us to be as a community. I began to see and name that our

ultimate authority was found in relationship. Our relationships with God, ourselves, each other, and all of creation are the interpretive thread that holds the entire theological and ecclesiological web together. In this way, relationships would have to be at the heart of the slate because (1) we come to know Jesus and the Triune God through relationships, (2) we come to know and participate in the central elements of being church through relationships, and (3) we interpret our experiences through relationships. In effect, the slate can be considered to constitute growing relationships over time.

Prayer, engagement with Holy Scripture, and direct mystical experiences of Jesus Christ through the sacraments were all ways that the three co-pastors had come to experience God in the past. Through sharing those experiences and interpreting them in community we had deepened our understanding of who Jesus is over time. Therefore, we began to implement a hermeneutic in the Slate Project that can be described as contextual, biblical, experiential, and relational. What is more, the core or essence of who we understand Jesus to be is not only known through a hermeneutical lens of relationships, but specifically relationships of love.

In the gospel of Matthew there is a story about a lawyer who came to Jesus and asked him, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22: 35-40). Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the core of the core; the heart of the heart of Jesus and his message. It is so simple, so

clear, and yet the church has piled so much on top of it that it has often gotten lost. Love is the criteria, the framework, and the method for understanding who God is and who Christians are called to be. Love is our hermeneutic.

Yet love is not abstract or theoretical; love is relational. The only way to know love is through relationships. This brings us back to the ways in which the church relates to God—through prayer, Scripture, experience, reason, and tradition. We must use what we know of love—learned through our relationships with God, ourselves, each other and all of creation—to interpret the ways we know God, even as we utilize these ways of knowing God to discern how to Love.

This method may seem to be a hermeneutical circle; however, I prefer to think of it as a hermeneutical *spiral* in which our understanding of love informs our interpretations of the means through which we know God (Scripture, prayer, etc.) and through knowing God, our experience and knowledge of love is continually transformed. This in turn transforms our understandings of the means by which we know God, and so on. This relational methodology requires the ability to change and to be transformed, therefore it not only follows a cyclical pattern, it is ever new.

Relationships are both the method and the means by which we know *who* God is, *who we* are, *how* God Loves, and *how* we are to love God, ourselves, our neighbor, and creation. Our relational response to God's love made known to us in Jesus Christ is the purpose for being church, the reason church exists. The heart of the church's identity is to be love in relationship. Therefore, who we know Christ to be is grounded in this love. The church must make room for the magnitude and multitude of ways Christ makes

God's love known to us individually and collectively, hence the need for a christology of multiplicity.

A Christology of Multiplicity

According to Patrick S. Cheng, "Jesus Christ's own questions to his disciples—'Who do you say that I am?'—shows that Jesus *anticipated* a multiplicity of christologies from his followers."⁴⁸ A multiplicity of christologies creates the conditions where it is possible for the church to bear witness to the truths we believe without excluding others who believe differently or rejecting their truths. Cheng believes that if the church is skillful in "engaging in the art of interpretation, we may find ourselves being changed by what is brought to us by others."⁴⁹ It is possible that our beliefs may even be changed by what we learn from others. To be open to multiple ways of encountering Christ we must have courage and rely on grace—both of which are given to us through our relationships with God.

Differing theologies have been battled over since Christianity's beginnings, nearly always resulting in winners and losers. When Christianity became the official religion of the empire, uniformity of belief as a means of control was a top priority for those in power. While a plethora of theologies, christologies, and ecclesiologies have continued to exist within the life of the church as a whole, the doctrines of the church set down in the creeds millennia ago have remained unchanged, limiting theological and christological exploration within the church. One might argue the purpose of the creeds is to be unchanging, however, in my opinion, the rigidity of theological expression they require

⁴⁸ Patrick S. Cheng, *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013), 148.

⁴⁹ Pugh, *The Matrix of Faith*, 137.

has inhibited theological development and this is a serious problem the church must address if its theology and purpose are to be relevant in a twenty-first century American church.

As Lisa Isherwood notes in her book *Introducing Feminist Christologies*, the early writers of Christian theology “grapple[d] with the stories attached to the life of Jesus in their own way” and came to different conclusions.⁵⁰ It was never their intention to come to a single orthodox position, “but rather to engage with what had been understood as redemptive praxis.”⁵¹ In other words, the practice of grappling with the stories of our faith is redemptive for the church *in and of itself*. Engaging in an ongoing conversation about who God is and the church’s calling is one way the church can participate in its own ongoing redemption.

Theologian Gordon Kaufman argues that the church has made a mistake in viewing theology as ideology rather than as an ongoing conversation.⁵² Too often church has presumed that “theology is essentially a body of truths which can be defined clearly and can be passed on from generation to generation, instead of an *activity* requiring continuous adjustments of the thinking of each of us to all the others with whom we are *ipso facto* thinking together.”⁵³ There is much to learn from the diversity of theologies and christologies that have developed over the course of history, if we would give them their place in our churches.

⁵⁰ Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2011), 11.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Gordon Kaufman, *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 64.

⁵³ Ibid.

To this end, the Slate Project has encouraged our community to assume the posture of learners in order that we might benefit from as wide a range of theological and christological understandings as possible. We believe the benefits to exploring how others experience and understand God outweigh any possible discomforts. The worst thing that could happen is that another person's experience and understanding of God will not match our own, and therefore we would not choose to incorporate what we have learned into our own beliefs. At best, we will have been introduced to a new way of encountering God that is utterly transformational and life giving.

In order to learn more about the multiple ways of understanding Christ, in 2014 the Slate Project embarked on a Lenten series that had a different christological focus each week. We explored the Black Christ, the Feminist Christ, the Queer Christ, the Disabled Christ, the Non-violent Christ, and the Poor Christ. As a part of this series we invited a different person with a personal connection or interest in that week's particular christology, to teach during BreakingBread and to be featured in a short video exploring that same christology.⁵⁴ We showed these videos during BreakingBread and posted them on our YouTube page in order to share them more widely.

Tamika Jancewicz is an example of a person who had a transformative experience when she was introduced to a way of understanding Christ she had never encountered before. When Tamika came to the Slate Project she was nearly ready to leave the church all together. When asked why she was dissatisfied with church she said it was for a combination of reasons. "I felt like the churches I had attended were not really addressing

⁵⁴ All videos can be found on our YouTube page <https://www.youtube.com/user/slateprojectbmore>.

social issues. The focus was on ‘personal relationships’ with Jesus, and not horizontal relationships with neighbors—unless the relationship with other people had to do with saving their soul.”⁵⁵ She also felt she could not live up to the church’s expectations in order to be “saved” by the church’s standards. “It felt impossible to be good in the way I was supposed to be. It was exhausting.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, she was not getting what she wanted or needed from her church community. “I saw more people who were un-churched doing more work in the world for good, than the people who went to church all the time.”⁵⁷

The first time Tamika came to BreakingBread she came to support her husband Ben who was teaching that evening about his experience of the intersections between faith and art. They brought their two children, Nia and Arian, with them. Tamika was wary at first, but she and her family returned repeatedly.

I kept coming back because I felt welcomed and it was so different than anything I'd experienced. I wasn't used to liturgical worship, so that was intriguing. And when we started to [spend more time together] and I started to really get to know you all, it was like I was among family.⁵⁸

Tamika did the teaching at BreakingBread the evening we discussed the Black Christ. She shared her experience of encountering the Black Christ for the first time in a video we filmed and shared during BreakingBread. She eloquently described the Black Christ “the one who sees our suffering” and spoke of how powerful it was for her to imagine Jesus as one of her kin.⁵⁹ “Jesus was in communion with people that others

⁵⁵ Tamika Jancewicz, text message, January 14, 2017.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “#reLENT 2015 | Black Christ,” YouTube, accessed April 14, 2017,

didn't see as fit.”⁶⁰ Putting the Black Christ in the context of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, she noted how “people are crying for justice and equality” and instead of the church passively asking, “What would Jesus do?” she said the church needs to go be where Jesus is.⁶¹ Tamika experienced the Black Christ as the one who stands “amongst those people holding up the signs. . . [who] sees their suffering, sees their hurt and does something about it.”⁶² Tamika had spent most of her life in church and had never been invited to see Jesus Christ in a way that resonated with her existence as a black woman. This is one example of how utilizing a theology of multiplicity that intentionally introduces multiple ways of viewing Christ has opened up a transformational space for people to encounter Jesus in the Slate Project community.

Throughout our Lenten series, as we discussed different ways of understanding Christ, we began to focus on the characteristics of Christ that informed our understanding of what it meant to be church with a clean slate. We discussed not only what these christologies told us about who Jesus Christ is, but also what they told us about who we are called to be as the church, by virtue of the church's relationship with Christ. Rather than discuss each individual christology here, I will discuss the four christological characteristics that the Slate Project community identified as central to the identity of a church with a clean slate.

Christ as Liberator

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXFKjJ2_IDo.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

During our seminary training, each of the three co-pastors were steeped in liberation theologies and were trained to bring a lens of liberation to our ministries and our lives. Therefore, Christ as liberator was one of the first characteristics we three co-pastors identified to be at the heart of understanding Christ's identity and, therefore, the church's identity as Christ's Body.

Understanding Christ as liberator means understanding Christ to be the one who reaches out to embrace those who have been excluded, oppressed, marginalized, and suffered unjustly. During his life, Jesus spent time with people who were considered unclean and unworthy, creating and constructing counter-narratives of grace and peace that were intentionally disruptive and destabilizing to the prevailing power structures of his time. In Jesus' life, we witness God's solidarity with outsiders, those who suffer, and all those who refuse to conform to the rules determined by the principalities and powers of this world.⁶³

The gospels tell the story of Jesus outlining the heart of his ministry: speaking while a congregation gathered at the local synagogue, he read from the book of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Isaiah 61: 1-2; Luke 4: 18-19). By saying "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21) Jesus declared the already-not-yet-ness of the Kingdom of God he proclaimed. In other words, his ministry and the ministry of those who follow him would be and will be

⁶³ Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies*, 101-104.

characterized by commitments and actions dedicated to liberation. If the purpose of the church is to be followers of Christ, then any form of theology, christology or action by the church that supports the oppressor rather than standing on the side of the oppressed must be identified as sinful, confessed, and rejected. Understanding the liberative power of Christ invites, perhaps even demands, the church as the Body of Christ to embody ways of being in the world that are liberative in both intent and impact.

While the world is, in some ways, getting smaller due to globalization, the world's problems (or our awareness of the world's problems) are growing. Many churches are struggling against a general apathy or helplessness with too much to do and not enough time, resources, or energy to do it all. Because they are so overwhelmed, rather than doing *something*, many communities instead do nothing. Understanding the liberative nature of Christ has the power to convict the church of its sins of apathy.⁶⁴ The liberative character of Christ means that the church must be willing to “challenge the powers and principalities that result in systemic oppression”⁶⁵ and demand the church work toward the liberation of all of creation. As Emma Lazarus said, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.”⁶⁶ The church is not responsible for fixing everything or even, necessarily, being successful in worldly terms. We are responsible, however, to faithfully participate in God's liberative actions in the world. In this way, Christ's liberative character can inform the church's identity and impact our calling.

⁶⁴ Patrick S. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012), 94-96.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁶ Emma Lazarus, *An Epistle to the Hebrews* (Publications of the Jewish Historical Society of New York, No. 4: 1987), 44.

Christ as Subvertor

Not only did Jesus refuse to conform to the religious and political norms of his day, in many ways he actively subverted traditional behaviors and boundaries. For example, Jesus refused to accept boundaries regarding who was clean or unclean, particularly when it came to designations regarding when and with whom it was permissible to eat, work, or relate. Jesus frequently ate with tax collectors and known sinners (Mark 2:15-17; Matthew 9:10-11); challenged the religious norms of the day like fasting (Mark 2:18-20; Matthew 9:14-15); permitted his disciples to gather grain to eat on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2: 23-28; Luke 6: 1-5); and he himself healed on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-11, 13:10-17; Mark 3:1-6; John 5: 1-18; Matthew 12:9-14). These stories are often grouped together in the gospels, possibly to highlight the subversive nature of Jesus' ministry.

Rather than simply following the accepted conventions of his day and supporting the status quo, he challenged his followers to ground their identity in God's liberating love, which often meant subverting established civic and religious powers. If the church desires to be Christ's presence in the world we must become even more astute at challenging systems that do not function in support of the gospel. Jesus was not afraid to challenge corruption where he saw it, flipping over tables in the temple and imploring the faithful not to make his Father's house a den of robbers (Matthew 21: 12-13). The subversive character of Christ invites the church to question what is acceptable and to challenge what is normal.

Far from being “depolitical,”⁶⁷ Jesus’ interactions with the world around him took place within the context of Roman imperialism. He proclaimed the imminence and presence of the Kingdom of God through his words and through his “healings, exorcisms, feedings, and covenantal teachings.”⁶⁸ The Kingdom of God Jesus spoke of and worked to bring about was not merely a religious revival but a complete reversal of systemic political and economic oppression. While it is possible that Jesus at one time understood his liberative and restorative ministry to be meant solely for the people of Israel, there is evidence that his perspective broadened to include an “alternative social order of cooperation and social justice free of oppression”⁶⁹ for those outside of Israel. This may have happened because Jesus himself experienced the subversive power of relationships, such as in his encounter with the Canaanite woman who stood for her own dignity and worth, proclaiming her right to the “crumbs under the table” (Matthew 15: 21-28). It is likely this woman’s subversive faith had a transformative effect on Jesus and his understanding of God’s love expanded as a result of their encounter.

Subversion has liberative qualities—it expands the spiritual boundaries and parameters we like to put in place regarding who and what is “in” or “out.” The subversive quality of Christ frees us to imagine and then create new incarnations of church that we have not even dreamed of before. Because the act of being church can happen wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name (Matthew 8:28), the church does not need to be confined to gathering on Sunday mornings in designated

⁶⁷ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 13.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

buildings. Bread can be broken and the cup can be shared at any time and in any place. A word of good news can be offered and grace can be dispensed from any place, not just a pulpit, and by any person, not just someone who is ordained. If we begin to play expansively with what it means to be the church we can even begin to imagine that church can take place online, during a digital conversation or gathering on Twitter, for example.

Precisely because the Body of Christ is not limited to a certain time or space, the Slate Project considers what happens during our weekly tweet chat, #SlateSpeak, to be church happening online in real time. People who participate in #SlateSpeak regularly affirm this, claiming #SlateSpeak as their church. Here is a message we received from a regular #SlateSpeak participant, Dorothy Charles:

I'll say it again: TSP/SlateSpeak is my church right now. I don't go to a 'brick and mortar' church. My church and my Christian community are all on Twitter, and while there is still something to be said about physically participating in Eucharist every week, it means a lot more to me to have a Christian community that sees and loves all of me—all my queerness, blackness, and Asian-ness; all of my doubts, questions, and anger—and still tells me that all of that is human and beautiful and useful to God.⁷⁰

When the Slate Project community engages with one another on social media “we give each other life and meaning to go on”⁷¹ by honoring each other's stories, mourning each other's sadness, and celebrating each other's joys.

There are often very real risks to subverting the existent powers. Jesus warned his followers that he was sending them out like sheep among wolves (Matthew 10:16). His message was so threatening he was killed for it. While the majority of American

⁷⁰ Dorothy Charles, Direct twitter message to Jason Chesnut, December 14, 2016.

⁷¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands* (New York: Ave Maria Press, 1972), 33.

Christian's lives are not at risk for following Christ, there are other deaths we may face—deaths of relationships, careers, beliefs, etc. Perhaps this is why G. K. Chesterton said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting—it has been found difficult and left untried.”⁷² The church will talk about “being crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20) and “buried in his death” (Romans 6:4) but we rarely move beyond the metaphors. Churches resist adapting and changing because they are afraid of risking their lives. We are adamant that the church is not dying. Yet, dying is what the church is called to do—to die with Christ.

Rarely does the church live as a community of people who have already died and therefore do not fear death. Rarely do we willingly accept that we are caught up in the cycle of death and resurrection to new life. Even the Slate Project has struggled with this. While we excitedly discerned and looked forward to what “new thing” God was calling us to be, when we reached the point in our own life cycle that something we had created would need to die in order for a new thing to be born, we struggled. We had to remind ourselves that following Jesus means putting everything on the line, time and again, being willing to lose all we have, our very lives, in order to save them. “To refuse to do so is to turn from his Way.”⁷³

The church is called to be a resurrection people. We follow a God who brings new life out of death. But we cannot live that new life until we go through death. The church must always be asking ourselves in what ways we are being called to die in order that we

⁷² G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1912), 48.

⁷³ Dwight Zscheile, “From Establishment to Innovation: Rethinking Structure in a New Apostolic Age,” in *What Shall We Become? The Future and Structure of the Episcopal Church*, ed. Winnie Varghese (New York: Church Publishing, 2013), 65.

might truly live. This is a subversive way to live, one that depends on being in relationship with a subversive God and a subversive Jesus Christ.

Christ as Interconnected

A christology of multiplicity allows for multiple understandings of Christ where the diversity of humanity is acknowledged and honored within the Body of Christ. The belief that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine affirms that Jesus had multiple identities within himself. As such, there must be room within Christ's body, his church, for multiple and intersecting identities that do not need to be bifurcated or erased, but can be seen as inextricably intertwined.

Our interconnectedness within Christ should not be denied and or overlooked. Neither should the interconnectedness of all things, and therefore all of creation, in Christ. Christ is "before all things and in him all things hold together (Colossians. 1:17). This interconnectedness embodies the message that all of humanity and all of creation are "dependent on each other, not just for survival but for flourishing."⁷⁴ Thankfully, the understanding that humans are interconnected to all of creation, and therefore have a responsibility to care for our planet, is growing in contemporary society and must continue to grow in the church.

An understanding of the interconnected nature of Christ allows for an understanding of christology that is cosmic in nature. Christ as the Logos, the pre-existent Word, the first-born of all creation has an inherently cosmic significance.⁷⁵ In this way,

⁷⁴ Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 121.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

the “entire cosmos can be thought of as the ‘Body of Christ.’”⁷⁶ This idea creates room for thinking of the Christian church not as the “sole end of all faith traditions” but rather “one tradition among many in the multi-membered body of the Interconnected Christ.”⁷⁷

Blessedly, when seen as interconnected, Jesus Christ “can never be used as a stick with which to beat others as this is contrary to the interrelated nature of his own existence.”⁷⁸ Harm is surely done whenever the church uses Christ to “beat” others. God’s creative power is the power to love and be loved. This understanding of love recognizes the interrelatedness between our love for God and our love for neighbor and it recognizes that we cannot have one without the other.

As science continues to discover the interconnectedness of all things, Christ can be understood as the divine embodiment and the source of those connections. Richard Rohr says, “When we believe in Jesus Christ, we’re believing in something much bigger than just the historical incarnation that we call Jesus...The entire sweep of the meaning of the Anointed One, the Christ, includes us and includes all of creation since the beginning of time.”⁷⁹ This is not a new idea—early Eastern Fathers like Origen of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor were attuned to the mystical understanding that “Christ” was somehow historically older, larger, and different than the man Jesus of Nazareth.

Understanding the interconnected nature of Christ can help us to identify and let go of unhelpful theology and practices that unnecessarily position Christianity over and against other religions and faith traditions. Rohr continues,

⁷⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies*, 42.

⁷⁹ Richard Rohr, “God in All Things,” Center for Contemplation and Action, October 23, 2016, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://cac.org/god-in-all-things-2016-10-23/>.

The “Christ Mystery” is much bigger than Christianity as an organized religion. If we don’t understand this, Christians will have little ability to make friends with, build bridges to, understand, or respect other religions or the planet. Jesus did not come to create a country club or a tribe of people who could say, “We’re in and you’re out. We’ve got the truth and you don’t.” Jesus came to reveal something that was true everywhere, for everyone, and all the time.⁸⁰

On the Slate Project’s website in the “About” section we say that “Jesus did not come to start a new religion.” Jesus came to show us the Way. Recognizing the interconnected character of Christ means recognizing that there is no part of the Body of Christ that can say to another “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21).

A recent addition to our communal practice of gathering online is #SlateReads. This is our version of a book group and we convene on Twitter on Wednesdays at 8 PM EST. One of the books we read together was *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* by Patrick Cheng. When discussing the chapter on the Interconnected Christ we shared examples of when we had experienced the Interconnected Christ. One participant said they had seen the Interconnected Christ at work in Muslim communities raising money to help repair vandalized Jewish tombstones after the rise in anti-Semitic violence. Another said she experienced the Interconnected Christ when she witnessed people of all faiths and no faith standing together at Standing Rock to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline. This specific conversation, which took place during an online gathering of church, is an example in and of itself of the interconnected nature of the church as Body of Christ, that exists beyond the limitations of physical place that have traditionally been understood as a requirement for being church. Through participating in digital gathering spaces like #SlateSpeak and #SlateReads, my personal understanding of what

⁸⁰ Richard Rohr, “Bigger than Christianity,” Center for Contemplation and Action, October 31, 2016, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://cac.org/bigger-than-christianity-2016-10-31/>

qualifies as church has been expanded due to the interconnectedness I have experienced through relationships that exist completely online.

Understanding Christ as interconnected and even cosmic can have a profoundly transformational effect on the way we relate to God, ourselves, each other, and creation, by bringing about a major shift in consciousness. This shift in consciousness can help the church understand itself as interconnected where, as the Apostle Paul says, all the members are all one Body in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 12:5).

Christ as Vulnerable

In his teaching, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ showed us that God is loving, dynamic, and relational. Moreover, Jesus showed us that God is vulnerable. This characteristic of Jesus (and of God) has rarely been accepted by the church because it goes against prevailing notions of God as all-powerful. But in Jesus Christ we see a God who is willing to be affected physically, emotionally, and spiritually by humanity and by creation. Christian notions of God's power must therefore always take into account God's vulnerability.

The vulnerability inherent in God's act of taking on human form and being born as an infant is undeniable—for what could be more vulnerable for God than to become a finite human person? Similarly, to paraphrase Athanasius of Alexandria, God became human so humanity could become divine.⁸¹ In this way, God redeems our understanding of what it means to be human—for to be human means to be created in the image and

⁸¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, transl. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), 107.

likeness of God (Genesis 1: 27) and to live as a follower of Christ means to grow in the likeness of Christ (Ephesians 4:15; Romans 8:29).

Jesus turns our conceptions of power and weakness on their heads, showing that vulnerability is not weakness, but divine strength. For example, when Jesus put himself in the position of servant, humbling himself to wash his disciples' feet, he showed in his actions both how God loves us and how God desires us to show one another love (John 13:1-7). He modeled receiving extravagant love from another person when he accepted and praised the unnamed woman's anointing of his feet with costly perfume (Matthew 26:6-12). Both giving and receiving love requires vulnerability. Vulnerability is so essential to love that Jesus declared this exchange between him and the woman at Bethany would be proclaimed throughout the whole world, wherever the good news is told.

Jesus is the embodiment of God's deepest desire for us—the desire for mutual connection and relationship, which depends upon mutual vulnerability. Awareness of this mutuality in relationship is what gave Jesus his power. He understood the paradox that power is found in powerlessness, that “powerlessness may be the most subversive and destabilizing choice to make in a world in love with its own power.”⁸² We are invited to this same transformative awareness.

I have experienced this christological characteristic of vulnerability in my relationships with my co-pastors of the Slate Project. Since the inception of our collegial relationship, we three co-pastors have intentionally practiced being vulnerable with one

⁸² Pugh, *The Matrix of Faith*, 163.

another, specifically in the ways we communicate and are present with one another. We have done this by continually encouraging, even demanding open, honest, and timely communication from each other regarding our professional, and even personal, feelings, concerns, joys, doubts, fears and expectations. We have let ourselves be seen, warts and all, so to speak, and we have honored each other in our wholeness, which necessarily includes our brokenness.

This level of vulnerability requires a certain level of trust. Maintaining and guarding this trust is key to maintaining healthy and whole relationships that continue to work on the level we want them to—a level where we all continue to find joy, creativity, and purpose in our joint ministry. Because we three co-pastors believe that Jesus models vulnerability, we have found both the impetus and the strength to practice being vulnerable with one another and to encourage this same vulnerability within the Slate Project community. We have done this by bringing certain norms and ways of being together that we practice as a triad into our communal life. These norms are based on the VISIONS guidelines⁸³ and include emphasizing each person speaking from their own perspective and experience, using “I” statements and avoiding generalizations; making room in conversations for dissent and disagreement, and yet, clearly stating that shaming or blaming others, or ourselves, is unacceptable; encouraging the “trying on” of new and different perspectives without insisting they be adopted; making room for people to bring their entire selves and all their feelings into a literal or virtual “room,” where they can be

⁸³ The VISIONS guidelines were developed by the consultant firm VISIONS Inc. for cross-cultural dialogues.

seen, accepted, and valued for who they are; and, therefore, not giving un-asked for advice, rather offering gratitude for what has been shared.

These norms and guidelines have helped to create a culture within the Slate Project where vulnerability is possible and encouraged. The semi-anonymous and removed nature of social media has, in some cases, added to the depth of sharing and helped some people to be vulnerable in ways they might not otherwise choose or be able to in face-to-face situations. Just witnessing another person's vulnerability has been a healing experience for some. One person tweeted: "Can I take a moment to say how much I appreciate this community and everyone's openness? This is a form of renewal to me ;)" and "#SlateSpeak helps restore my soul."⁸⁴ Another person said, "This was so healing. Thanks everyone for joining! It's a relief to know I'm not the only one unpacking," to which someone else responded, "you are not alone, in any sense of the word."⁸⁵

One #SlateSpeak regular, shared publically for the first time her family's history of mental illness during #SlateSpeak. "Being afraid to tell my families story for 18 years took a toll on me. When I finally told it, it was so freeing and healing! #SlateSpeak."⁸⁶ During another conversation Dorothy N. Charles wrote, "#SlateSpeak continues to be a space of healing and renewal for me. Very, very grateful for this community."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ "#SlateSpeak," Twitter, February 26, 2017.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., December 29, 2016.

⁸⁷ Ibid., July 7, 2016.

Speaking truth requires the courage to be vulnerable. An example of this courageous vulnerability was evident in both parties in a brief exchange between an African American woman and a white man.

African American Woman: “Anti-racism is ‘show, don’t tell’ kind of work. Don’t say your [sic] about it. Be about it.”

White Man: “My eyes are opening. I know I have done wrong. I am educating myself and working towards a better future. Maybe just words... #SlateSpeak is helping. Thank you for sharing.”⁸⁸

These are examples of preaching, confession, repentance, and thanksgiving that some might think is only possible in traditional church settings and impossible online. The incarnational vulnerability that Christ models can and does show up in every aspect of our relational lives, including on social media.

Understanding Christ as vulnerable can challenge the church to be conscious of the ways it participates in perpetuating conceptions of power and weakness that do not line up with the vulnerability Jesus practiced. Not only is this way of practicing vulnerability freeing and healing in our relationships with ourselves, each other, God and all of creation, it will be required if the church is to grow into the Body of Christ God is calling it to be. If the church can understand vulnerability as a divine quality, we can begin to understand the vulnerability required of the church to participate in our own redemption and the redemption of the world.

I have argued that God’s identity in Jesus is determinative of our identity as the church. The characteristics of Christ as Liberator, Subvertor, Interconnected, and Vulnerable have had a profound effect on the self-understanding of the Slate Project as

⁸⁸ Ibid., February 9, 2017.

we have come to discern our identity in our call to follow Christ. These characteristics of Christ are all relational. The Body of Christ is the mystical understanding of what the church is becoming through our relationships with God, ourselves, each other, and all of creation.

Yet we cannot stop at christology. In addition to a christology of multiplicity, the church must also employ a trinitarian theology in order to more fully understand the relational nature of God and therefore the relational nature of the church. We begin to know the relational nature of God in Christ, yet we come to more fully know God's relationality in the Trinity. Following Christ not only means imitating Christ. Following Christ is a relational commitment to a way of life that is fundamental to our identity, not only as individuals, but also as a community. It requires participating within God's triune life.

When we began to look at the Trinity, specifically the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the church, we located the relational agency that enables the church to actualize God's call. The Holy Spirit is the relational power of God at work in and through the church, enabling the church to participate in our own redemption, becoming, and co-creating of the Kingdom of God. In the next section I will explore how the Slate Project has determined that an understanding of God as Trinity is a core element of the slate.

Trinitarian Theology

The church in the United states has largely ignored the Trinity as a theological concept. Western traditions of Christianity have focused their trinitarian theology on

maintaining the singularity of God above all else, in order to avoid criticism that Christians worship more than one God. In the West, the triune God has traditionally been portrayed as a single divine essence, with the distinct persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit flowing from this source.⁸⁹ However, this is hardly the only way to view the Trinity.

In eastern traditions, Trinitarian theology has taken the relationality of the three divine persons as its starting point. The unity of these three divine persons is found “in the source or origin of the Father, as well as in their perichoresis, or mutual indwelling.”⁹⁰ In the twenty-first century American church, where there are “renewed calls for reciprocity, mutual openness, and a more dynamic understanding of God’s relationship with the world,” revisiting our trinitarian theologies can aid the church in responding to these calls.⁹¹

The first followers of Jesus “sought to make sense out of the relationship between the Jesus they had known as Lord, the Spirit they experienced in community, and the God of Israel to whom the scriptures gave witness, they developed the doctrine of the Trinity.”⁹² While nowhere in the Bible is God described using the word “Trinity,” there are several places where God is referred to as a unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16-17, 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:13; Ephesians 4:4-6).

Over time Christians developed the theological understanding of God as Trinity as a way of attesting to the richness of God’s internal communal life. According to

⁸⁹ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 103.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 110.

⁹² Zscheile, *People of the Way*. 46.

Zscheile, within the Trinity God's life takes on the shape and the characteristics of "mutuality, reciprocity, generosity, openness, and shared leadership."⁹³ This is how God is with God's self. Since God is Love, we know what Love is through God's exhibition of these Loving ways of being.

A God who exists as relationship demands multiplicity—there must be an "other" to love. "God's own being in the Trinity assumes otherness—the distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit is integral to the unity and relationality of God."⁹⁴ God's inherent relationality means that it is in God's nature to love and be loved. It is through the Holy Spirit that the church and all of creation is constantly being drawn into the relationships that make up the inner life of God. Therefore, what we know about God through the Trinity and God's identity as Trinity are determinative for the identity of the Church.

The prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John describes the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of this relationship into which Jesus draws the church:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:21b-23).

As we have already determined, being church with a clean slate means participating in the Body of Christ which therefore includes participating in the life of the triune God.

In our exploration of the Trinity, the Slate Project has focused on the characteristics of mutuality, generosity, and shared leadership as informative for how we view the core of the slate and our identity as church with a clean slate. I argue that

⁹³ Ibid., 117.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 60.

combined with the characteristics known through a christology of multiplicity, incorporating a Trinitarian theology that focuses on the mutuality, generosity, and shared leadership found in within the relationship of the triune God, the church gains a theologically grounded ecclesiology with the power to transform what it means to be the church.

Shared Leadership and the Trinity

When the Slate Project began and the entirety of the community existed between the three co-pastors we recognized that *the quality of our relationship with one another* would be a core element of the slate we were discerning. In the beginning, all we had was each other—our relationships with each other and our relationships with God. Our relationships literally formed our identity. While each of our denominations utilize hierarchical structures of authority, we decided we wanted to embody shared authority and leadership amongst ourselves as three co-pastors. This desire was rooted in our original longing to experience relationships in the church that were healthier and more whole than the relationships we had previously experienced with our partners in ministry. It was also grounded in “the original community of distributed authority”⁹⁵ we witnessed in the Trinity, and therefore we adopted it as a characteristic of our own.

Living out this shared, distributed authority has required significant work on our parts involving intentional, honest, open, and ongoing communication. We committed to one another to work on continually developing our self-awareness and affective

⁹⁵ Ibid., 121.

competence.⁹⁶ This way of being together in shared leadership has led us to accomplish more together than we ever could have accomplished individually. It has also contributed to a much more fulfilling and joyous experience of ministry than any of us had previously known.

A key factor in the health of our relationships has been not allowing our egos to dominate our interactions or our collective vision. We genuinely care for and support one another; the well-being of the “whole” is just as valuable as the well-being of the individuals. We have been able to model a community of shared leadership where our differences are assets, inviting opportunities for collaboration as well as instances where one of us has taken the lead and the others have offered support.

I can only speak for myself, but this way of being in relationship has been transformative. It has changed who I am as a priest and as a Christian. By changing my *experience* of being church it has transformed my *understanding* of what it means to be church. The openness I have experienced in these relationships has made me feel both known and loved which has enabled me to transcend who I have been to become someone new. As Margaret Farley says, “To step into relation with another is to step out of a center that holds only ourselves.”⁹⁷ Just the experience of stepping outside of myself to create a new community with my co-pastors has meant that my center is now both beyond myself and within myself. In other words, my identity now cannot be separated from myself in relation to my co-pastors and to the Slate Project community. We are

⁹⁶ I use the term “affective competence” as defined by William M. Kondrath meaning: “knowing and expressing our feelings, and knowing how others’ feelings assist or hinder community health, growth, and mission.” <http://www.billkondrath.com/>, accessed 3/28/17.

⁹⁷ Farley, *Just Love*, 129.

wrapped up in each other's becoming as together we become the church. No matter where our lives take us from here, our relationships have bound us together, eternally, in God.

The church is called to follow the Way of Christ and to "be Christ" to the world. "Christ" is what the church and all of creation are becoming, not on our own but through participating in our co-creation with God. If we can come to a deeper understanding of the importance of the inherently relational character of God for the life and identity of the church, then as we endeavor to participate in the life of God as members of the Body of Christ, we can begin to understand our church identity as fundamentally relational as well.

Now that we have explored who God is through a christology of multiplicity and trinitarian theology, we can delve deeper into our search for a clean slate for being church. If we know God to be the one whose relationships are characterized by a love that is liberative, subversive, interconnected, vulnerable, mutual and transformational, then the church, at its core, must be characterized by the same love. As such, we determine how to be the church through this lens of love and we pare down to the basics, leaving only what we, in our community and context, deem essential. Then with that clean slate we imagine the church God is calling us to be *now*.

Chapter Three

The Core Elements of the Slate

At our beginning, the Slate Project did not have a fully formed understanding of who God is like the one I have just outlined. Our discovery of who God is and our discernment of what the slate consisted of occurred concurrently. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I have explored our christological and trinitarian understandings of God first because they were foundational to how we came to understand what our “slate” consisted of, even though in practice they continue to inform one another’s development. I will now discuss how the Slate Project came to view prayer, engagement with Scripture, gathering for Holy Eucharist and living out our baptismal covenant to be the core of our slate.

After our initial conversation where the three co-pastors shared our longings and desires to explore together what it could mean to be church with a clean slate, we began to meet together regularly to pray and read Scripture. This decision was in and of itself our first step toward being church with a clean slate. In order to discern what “new thing” God was calling us to, we knew we had to pray together. The Holy Scriptures would be our shared context for beginning this journey together. In this way both prayer and engagement with Holy Scripture became part of our slate from the first time we met and in the follow sections I will explore why.

Prayer

I use the term prayer to refer to the way in which human beings communicate with God. This basic term can refer to a multitude of methods, for there are endless ways to pray, but I am using the concept of prayer itself to refer to more generally to communication between people and God. At times this communication has been viewed as mono-directional—humans directing their prayers toward God. However, prayer understood as two-way communication, between people and God, is more constitutive of relational communication. It would be difficult to develop, let alone maintain, any relationship where communication was only one-way. The more we communicate with God through prayer, the more of a relationship we develop with God. The more of a relationship we develop with God, the better we can tune in to God’s communication with us.

Prayer is a primary means by which Christians develop an awareness of God and come to know God more deeply. Sister Wendy Beckett says if you are a Christian you will want to pray; prayer “is the essence, the spontaneous result of believing in the real God.”⁹⁸ The first inkling or awareness that there is, or even might be, a being that can be called love, is prayer. The feeling or sense that something greater than myself exists, both within and outside myself, is also prayer. These are the beginnings of prayer—the beginnings of communicating and relating to the God that Christians know through Jesus Christ and the Trinity. Without going too far down the path regarding the agency involved in the beginnings of a relationship between humanity and God, I will say that I

⁹⁸ Sister Wendy Beckett, “Introduction,” in *The Church Times Book of 100 Best Prayers*, ed. Rachel Boulding (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2006), 1.

believe there is agency on the part of both parties, as any healthy relationship would require.

Prayer is inherently transformational. It changes both ourselves and God. Bass says, “The most ancient prayers of Christian faith have nothing to do with getting ideas about God right. Instead, they are prayers that reorder the heart, directing it anew.”⁹⁹ Prayer is the means by which we discern who God is calling us to be. Therefore, our prayers must include silence as well as words; listening as well as talking; contemplation as well as action. Silence in prayer allows us to let go of our own ideas and turn our wills over to God, “resting in the Divine Indwelling that is already present within us and waiting to reveal itself to us.”¹⁰⁰

The Church is called to be a people of prayer as part of our identity or our state of being. Prayer is not only what we do as church, it is who we are. Prayer enables the life of God to come alive in us. Our entire lives are meant to be prayer.

There is no absolute distinction between prayer and action. ‘By their fruits you shall know them’ (Matthew 7:20). If we pray—that is, if we accept that to be Christian means to live in God, more or less according to the depth of our faith—then we cannot cease from that relationship when we cease to turn our thoughts to God explicitly. What we do is our prayer in action.¹⁰¹

To pray without ceasing is an impossible possibility—a way to embody the already-not-yet-ness of being church and living out the kingdom of God.

Prayer is less about what we do and more about what we allow God to do in us.¹⁰²

As Henri Nouwen said, “when we are invited to pray we are asked to open our tightly

⁹⁹ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 206.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 2.

¹⁰¹ Beckett, “Introduction,” *The Church Times Book of 100 Best Prayers*, 3.

¹⁰² Williams, *Being Christian*, 78.

clenched fists and to give up our last coin.”¹⁰³ In other words, letting go of anything we believe might save us or bring us security. Opening our hands in prayer means acknowledging our fear, our doubt, even our anger, all of which are perfectly acceptable and necessary parts of prayer.

Lament is an intense form of prayer. There is an entire book of lament in the Psalms, and yet many people who have participated in the Slate Project have shared that they have not felt free to lament in their traditional churches. God desires that we bring our entire selves to our relationships with God and with each other. The church has said, “All are welcome,” but many have not *felt* welcome, instead feeling that all of who they are—certain aspects of their identity, certain feelings, certain behaviors—were not permissible in church. Prayer is most certainly a place to bring our entire selves and corporate prayer is a perfect place to practice creating space for one another and honoring the entirety of each person who shows up. When we have specifically encouraged prayers of lament many people have expressed their deep appreciation for the opportunity to express such emotions so freely within a church community.

In prayer we can name those things and feelings we cannot name anywhere else. This naming is incredibly important and powerful. It includes intentionally naming ways we have felt fractured or experienced interlocking oppressions in our own lives. Naming these wounds can have a healing effect. We have seen this again and again in the Slate Project community, particularly when individuals have had the chance to name publicly the rage, disappointment, frustration, and anguish they have felt at the hands of their own

¹⁰³ Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 14.

churches who have diminished their humanity, rejected their gifts, and told them they were unworthy of God's love. When the Slate Project community has named these sins, this has also been healing, for both those who have been oppressor and oppressed within the church. Naming, confessing, lamenting, repenting, asking and accepting forgiveness all have roles to play in prayer.

While prayer may be simple it is not necessarily easy. "It demands a relationship in which you allow the other to enter into the very center of your person, to speak there, to touch the sensitive core of your being."¹⁰⁴ Prayer allows God into the place within ourselves where our "life gets its form" and that can feel dangerous and uncomfortable.¹⁰⁵ In prayer, we can practice being uncomfortable. We can utter the three most freeing words there are: "I don't know." We can admit that we do not have all the answers; we do not know what to do next. We do not, in fact, as Thomas Merton says, "even know ourselves."¹⁰⁶

A posture of prayer is inherently a posture of vulnerability. Prayer invites "the constant expectation that God who makes everything new will cause you to be born again."¹⁰⁷ We discerned prayer to be a core element of the slate because it is the means and the method for our relationships with God. "The person who prayerfully goes about his life is constantly ready to receive the breath of God, and to let his life be renewed and expanded."¹⁰⁸ Being church with a clean slate allows the entire community to breathe

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2011), 147.

¹⁰⁷ Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 62.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 64.

deeply the breath of God and to live without fear of each other or fear of the unknown. We can allow ourselves to be led prayerfully into the future, expecting God to speak to us, full of the hope and promise of a new creation.

In our face-to-face weekly worship gathering, BreakingBread, the Slate Project engages in a wide variety of prayer practices. Every time we gather we sing together as a form of prayer. Typically, we use the paperless method taught by Music that Makes Community,¹⁰⁹ where one person teaches the song to those gathered and then leads them in the singing. This particular way of singing requires tuning in to the voices of the people around you to create music together, rather than relying on what is on the page. We find it invites a deeper presence and frees up the senses to focus on the mystical experience of communal singing.

We try to offer multisensory opportunities for prayer rather than always relying on written or spoken prayers. Our worship has included walking meditation, clay or playdough for tactile expression, weaving of fabrics with prayers written on them, stones held and dipped in baptismal waters, colored chalk to draw pictures, fabrics sewn together into a panel for Lent. Sometimes we offer multiple prayer stations and other times we all join in the same prayer practice.

Communal prayer has continued to be central to the life of the Slate Project community, particularly our ongoing discernment of what it means to be church with a clean slate. In the fall of 2015, in preparation for coming to the end of the three-year funding commitment from our original parish sponsor, we invited the community (both

¹⁰⁹ See “Music That Makes Community,” <http://www.musicthatmakescommunity.org>.

online and face-to-face) to #PrayTheWay—an intentional time of communal discernment and prayer, specifically regarding where/how God was calling the Slate Project to be church with a clean slate now/next. We used the acronym PRAY to plan four weeks of prayer, designating a different theme each week: Praise, Reflect, Arise, Yield.

For forty days, we invited everyone who felt a connection to the Slate Project to pray for guidance, asking God to show us where God was already at work in our individual and collective lives, in the life of our community, in Baltimore, and in the world. Specifically, we prayed to discern where and how God was inviting the Slate Project to co-create the Kingdom of God in our lives and in our community. Knowing and trusting that God was doing a new thing, we prayed for eyes to see and ears to hear.

Every time our community gathered during those four weeks, whether online or face-to-face, we set aside time to #PrayTheWay forward. We set aside time during these gatherings for people to share what they were discerning and encouraged similar sharing on social media. During this time of prayer, the three co-pastors specifically shared with the community that we (both individually and collectively) committed to them and to each other that we would practice releasing our anxiety about the unknown, including our impulses to control, strategize, and manage, in favor of dwelling in the possibilities of what could be. We asked the community to join us in this letting go and dwelling, trusting that God would lead us forward together.

When the forty days were over we gathered up what we had heard and presented it to our leadership team first and then shared it through an infographic with the rest of

the community. Keeping in mind that the purpose of our community is to discern what it means to be church with a clean slate, we asked four questions:

1. What have we kept (“the slate”)?
2. What have we let go of (“the crap”)?
3. Where is God at work in the Slate Project?
4. What is next for the Slate Project?

We synthesized the answers we received into the following summaries.

1. We have kept the core aspects of “The Way” of Jesus Christ, reclaiming the heart of the church’s ancient practices and reimagining what it means to follow Jesus in the twenty-first century. Therefore, we practice engaging the Holy Scriptures, practicing radical hospitality, gathering together online and face-to-face, breaking bread, praying together, caring for those in need and honoring what each person brings to the community.
2. We are challenging “traditional” ways of being church that hinder participation in God’s mission to reconcile all people to God’s self and to one another. The church is not a place; the church is the people. We do not distinguish between who is in and who is out of the Slate Project. We choose not to have our own building so we can put our focus elsewhere. We challenge the powers that be, in the Church and in the world, choosing prophetic witness over inaction, speaking the truth to power in love rather than staying silent, and standing in solidarity with the poor and oppressed instead of ignoring the suffering of our neighbors.
3. We see God at work in the people and the relationships we are forming. God is working through our radical hospitality, social justice action, diversity of faiths and faces, sharing the bread, and sharing our stories.
4. What is next for the Slate Project? MORE! More Bible study, storytelling (online and face-to-face), videos, communal prayer, singing, inviting people to teach and share their gifts, partnering with other groups and churches, continuing to focus on faith and everyday life. NEW STUFF: Connect to other missional communities around the world, see how other faith communities fundraise, have honest conversations about money, host retreats, workshops, and conferences.

Prayer has been the crux of our process, the heart of our being as a church community. What we have discerned together through our communal prayer has shaped and informed every aspect of our community. Our experience of prayer has shown us

how vital prayer is to the church's life together, not just as an activity required of the church, but as a foundational core element of what it means to be church.¹¹⁰

Scripture

As soon as we had begun to build relationships with a critical mass of people who were interested in participating in a new expression of church, the three co-pastors began to pray and reflect on our next step. We wanted to host some kind of gathering where we could gently introduce our project to reimagine church and invite participation into an element of that reimagining that did not feel forced, heavy-handed, or too “churchy.”

We decided to host a series of open-mic nights. This gave us the chance to begin to build a larger sense of community among those we had talked to one-on-one about the Slate Project by creating a safe and open space where people could share as they felt comfortable. It also began to place the concept of shared story at the center of the community we were building. We had four events with four related themes: Stories of Saints and Sinners (October 2013), Stories of Thanks (November 2013), Stories of Darkness (Advent/December 2013) and Stories of Light (Epiphany/January 2014). Some people spoke or sang about topics that related to faith or spirituality, but most of what was shared would not necessarily have been categorized as having to do with church. Regardless, we at those open mic nights we began to create a community around the concept of a shared story—a theme at the heart of Holy Scripture.

¹¹⁰ While the example I have given focuses on a time of prayer in our community *for our community*, because we hold the scriptural mandate to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves as a core element of “the slate,” we practice praying not only for ourselves but for each other, for the entire world, and for all of creation.

Christians believe God continues to speak through the Living Word of Holy Scripture. The Scriptures are sacred not only because they record the unfolding relationship between God and God's people in a particular time and place, but also because they are revelatory. Therefore, those who follow Christ must listen to the Word of God in order to continue to hear a new Word from God. However, the church at times has forgotten that whatever we hear or interpret from the Word of God is just that—an interpretation.

Each person and community who interprets the sacred texts must be aware of the lenses through which they encounter the text. When we are not aware that ours is only one interpretation of many, we cut ourselves off from the revelatory power of the sacred story by making our interpretation an idol. The church's understanding of Scripture must be capable of changing to allow for growth and transformation. Instead of looking for the one "right way" to engage Scripture, followers of Jesus should encourage one another to explore many different ways of relating to the text.

There are many methods of Biblical interpretation, any and all of which should be open to exploration in the church. Each of these methods involves what the Benedictine tradition calls "listening with the ear of the heart."¹¹¹ We must approach the biblical text from "an open space of listening, a space in which the memory, reason, and skill of our lives meet the Word found indwelling in the text."¹¹² This practice allows for a mutual

¹¹¹ Mary Margaret Funk, *Discernment Matters: Listening with the Ear of the Heart* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), xxi.

¹¹² Mary C. Earle, *Broken Body, Healing Spirit: Lectio Divina and Living with Illness*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), 16.

indwelling to develop where we see ourselves in the Word of God and the Word of God begins to dwell in us.

The church's identity is dependent on our sacred story to tell us who we have been, who we are, and to point us toward who we are becoming. In this way, church is a community formed by story. Dwight Zscheile has argued that "the Bible must become the primary framework by which people make sense out of their lives and the surrounding culture, instead of the reverse."¹¹³ Zscheile claims that people's general lack of biblical knowledge means they are often unaware of the "strangeness and complexity"¹¹⁴ within the biblical narrative. While I agree this is often the case, I would not argue for the Bible to take primacy in people's interpretive frameworks over and against their life experience, tradition, reason, and relational ways of knowing. Rather, I believe these ways of knowing must be held together and used in relationship with one another for determining how Christians are to make sense of our theological lives. When we have failed to hold these tensions in the past, the limitations of the text (context, culture, worldview) have overshadowed the other ways of knowing and resulted in the continuation of ways of being church that are sexist, colonialist, homophobic, xenophobic, hierarchical, etc. Perhaps these sins could have been challenged sooner had other ways of knowing been given greater authority in relation to the biblical text.

An example would be the church's understanding of homosexuality and same-sex relationships. Based on the primacy of biblical texts, a few verses of Scripture have historically been used by the church to shame, scapegoat, and abuse LGBTQI persons.

¹¹³ Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 92.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

When viewed in relationship with different cultural expressions, relational experiences, scientific discoveries, and the overall themes of Scripture which are oriented toward justice and love, new and affirming interpretations of the biblical story have been developed that respect and affirm the dignity of LGBTQI persons as children of God. While some Christian denominations have been engaged in conversations about human sexuality and alternative interpretations of Scripture for decades, many people who participate in the Slate Project have not had the opportunity to participate in these types of conversations in their own faith communities. Many people have shared how grateful they are to have found a faith community that is open and affirming of all sexualities and gender expressions, and creates space for ongoing conversation where people can share experiences of hurt as well as participate in the creation of a different kind of church, one they desperately need.

Because the Slate Project boldly take on controversial issues and engage in tough conversation, we inevitably experience differences of opinion. When this happens, specifically pertaining to scriptural interpretation, we fall back on our norms and guidelines. We have learned the importance of restating and recommitting ourselves to these guidelines before every conversation, especially one we assume may be difficult, so that if the tone or tenor of the conversation starts to go against the guidelines, we can point to the authority of our communal norms and remind one another of the importance of engaging communication that reflect the type of community we want to be. Before any discussion or engagement with Scripture, whoever is leading or facilitating will use the guidelines as a frame, particularly focusing on encouraging the trying-on of new and

different perspectives, practicing self-focus, affirming the presence of disagreement, naming shaming and blaming as unacceptable, inviting both/and thinking, and encouraging awareness of intent verses impact. In face-to-face gatherings, we ask that people only share their own stories outside the physical room we are in. Since social media is a public medium, we do not expect confidentiality, but rather ask that people let others tell their own stories and reinforce speaking from our own perspectives.

We have discerned engagement with the Word of God revealed in Holy Scripture to be a core element of the slate and an essential part of the church's identity. And yet, we have learned to keep in mind that "every word spoken in the Bible is a partial and limited witness to truth" and "not let our preferences silence any biblical voice, nor should we read the Bible merely to assure ourselves that we are right but, rather, to look for areas in which we have not been listening."¹¹⁵ The better the church knows our shared sacred stories contained in Scripture, the better we will know ourselves. Holy Scripture is a core element of the slate because it reveals to the church who and whose we are and, as such, it grounds us in relationship with God, ourselves, each other, and all of creation.

Holy Eucharist

As the three co-pastors discerned how we would begin to gather people together for our new experiment in being church, we looked at what other non-traditional communities were doing. Both Jason Chesnut and I knew the Rev. Emily Scott, pastor of St. Lydia's in Brooklyn, New York, so the three of us made a trip to visit and worship with their community. We experienced the beautiful "dinner church" liturgy that they

¹¹⁵ Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, *Listening Hearts*, 37.

have pioneered and immediately felt a sense of possibility and call to create our own version of a dinner church. Thanks to relationships with local organizations and congregations, we had access to borrowed space (including a kitchen), funds to help offset the costs of providing dinner, and liturgical traditions (Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian) from which to draw on to create a meaningful experience of worship and fellowship.

We designed our liturgy completely within the context of the meal. Beginning in darkness we open with song and a word of welcome before sharing the light with one another as the flame is passed from candle to candle. Then the entire group processes into the space where tables and chairs are set for dinner and we all stand in a circle as we break and share the bread. Casual conversation happens over a meal prepared by one or more volunteers from within the community and then as people finish eating, a teaching is offered by one of the co-pastors, a guest, or a member of the community. Teaching styles vary so sometimes there is more communal conversation, other times there is more digital engagement; each time we create a space for engagement where all are invited to share their own experiences and speak from their own perspectives. This is another example of where our community norms are used to create a container for conversation.

The second to last question in the baptismal covenant, “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?”¹¹⁶ reminds us that the earliest Christian communities gathered together in the context of a communal meal with prayers and teaching. The community we read about in the book of

¹¹⁶ The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 305.

Acts formed its identity through the hearing and sharing of a sacred story, receiving and offering God's hospitality through bread and cup in the context of a meal, and sharing a life of prayer (Acts 2:42). These are elements that have come to be understood as parts of the Holy Eucharist or Communion.

Since its earliest beginnings, a designating marker of the church has been gathering together for a common meal that echoes and remembers the last supper Jesus had with his disciples. This "Last Supper" is recorded in the synoptic gospels and in the letters of Paul. We read that Jesus took the bread and the cup, blessed them, gave thanks for them and gave them to his disciples saying, "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11: 24; Luke 22: 19). The meal took place during the Jewish festival of Passover when the Jews remembered and celebrated their liberation from slavery in Egypt and it is possible that this last supper with Jesus and his friends was a celebration of the Passover meal itself. This has contributed to an understanding of the Eucharist as an enactment of liberation for Christians—Jesus' giving of himself in the bread and the wine representing him giving his life for the church.

Looking to the past in order to identify the Eucharistic understandings and practices of the earliest Christian communities is a complex endeavor. As Diarmaid MacCulloch writes, there are few things we can know for certain. "The power and the mystery of the Eucharist, linking the crucified Saviour [sic] to those who break bread and drink wine ever afterwards, has provoked intense devotion, gratitude and joy among Christians, yet also deep anger and bitterness when they argue about what it means."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 92.

Ironically, the table where the feast of God is spread—a key metaphor for the church’s understanding of God’s hospitality—has been the focal point of some of the deepest divides in the church. Many still disagree about who is able to receive God’s hospitality at this meal.

Coming to the table to receive the body and blood of Christ should serve as a reminder that as we are invited to God’s table as God’s guests and are therefore called to invite others to be God’s guests as well.¹¹⁸ The hospitality we receive from God is the hospitality we are called to offer to others. We live in a time and in a society where, Zscheile notes, “tables of hospitality are mostly closed off to strangers,” and yet the Eucharist is “a public feast.”¹¹⁹ A theology grounded in liberation, multiplicity, and the interconnectedness of all creation cannot abide by a closed table. Grace and forgiveness are literally and figuratively on the table in the Eucharist, offered to all, so we may then in turn offer grace and forgiveness to the world. As a core element of the church’s identity, the Eucharist communicates the church to be welcoming, hospitable people who feed one another physically and spiritually.

The Slate Project community understands itself to be a group of people who come together in the name of Christ to feed one another and to be. Since we began gathering for weekly dinner church, people have come to BreakingBread from all walks of life in search of physical and spiritual food. Feeding each other has become a central spiritual practice, through the meals we prepare, the encouragement we offer one another, and the space we have created where all parts of all our selves are welcome and received. This

¹¹⁸ Williams, *Being Christian*, 46.

¹¹⁹ Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 44.

has not been easy—dealing with each other’s brokenness never is. We have had to navigate members of our community stealing from one another, mental health issues interfering with interpersonal communication, and unintentionally harming one another as we work through our blind spots and take missteps along the way. Some of these instances have been very painful. But there has been grace in these moments, too, and we have found our way back to one another, remembering that we are all doing the best we can with what we have in any given moment. Our best attempts at loving relationships have not always worked. We are human and we are fallible. We cannot force anyone to remain in relationship. But we can continue trying with those who continue with us on the journey, and of course, with God’s help.

When the church gathers around the table and partakes in the bread and cup,¹²⁰ our individual and collective brokenness is received into the broken-yet-whole body of God. Ilia Delio describes it this way:

... in the death and resurrection of Jesus, all is being transformed and drawn into a new relation with God. The Eucharist marks the *beginning* of a new future, not the end. Those who participate in the Eucharist are asked to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus, not as a past event but as the power of the future. The remembrance is an empowerment to go and do the same: to die and rise in this new pattern of life at the heart of the universe that is the Christ.¹²¹

In the simple act of gathering around the table and sharing with each other the bread and cup, we find “there an expression of God’s grace and love, an experience of what it

¹²⁰ In order to be as hospitable and welcoming as possible to people with addictions, allergies, etc., we only use grape juice and gluten free bread during our meals together.

¹²¹ Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 99.

means to be the church in the Spirit's power, and healing and hope for service in the world.”¹²²

One of the Slate Project's face-to-face members, Pamela Shuggi, wrote about her experience of sharing the bread at BreakingBread for our #JesusCoffee blog. Pamela was raised Roman Catholic, but says she “became agnostic from the age of thirteen or fourteen” and “officially stopped going to mass” when she turned eighteen.¹²³ She continued to be interested in life's big questions and studied philosophy. She recalled, “One day I was sitting alone in my apartment, feeling the deafening silence and isolation and I suddenly had a singular thought: ‘Find a church.’”¹²⁴ She had a good experience attending a local Episcopal church and yet she was still looking for more. She writes about her first experience of the Slate Project:

When I arrived at my first Breaking Bread [sic] service, I was overcome by friendliness. Everyone greeted each other and prepared for dinner. One or two chefs manned the kitchen. After singing and lighting candles, we gathered in a circle and one of the ministers blessed a loaf of bread and broke it in two, saying “This is my body, broken for you.” Jenn's four-year-old son endearingly calls it the “Jesus Bread.” Half the loaf was passed around and each person broke off a piece, handing it to his or her neighbor and echoing the minister's words... once I tried the Jesus Bread a quiet calm settled over my heart. It stayed there as I made new friends over dinner and I got to take the feeling home with me. We all shared in the loaf. Grape juice was drunk at the end of the meal as one of the ministers said, “And at the end of the meal, he took the cup and said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’”¹²⁵

¹²² Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 44.

¹²³ Pamela Shuggi, “Holy Repast: Finding Community in Communion,” The Slate Project, March 17, 2017, <http://www.slateproject.org/blog/holy-repast-finding-community-in-communion-by-pamela-shuggi>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Pamela experiences the Eucharist at BreakingBread to be both “spiritually nourishing” and “emotionally uplifting.”¹²⁶ Since being a co-con[spirit]tor with the Slate Project, she says it is “a lot easier to hold the ‘big questions’ in my heart and accept that sometimes there is no clear answer, just [like] Kierkegaard’s ‘leap of faith.’”¹²⁷ The experience of communion has surely become a place of community for her.

During the Eucharist, the church embodies, even if only for a moment, who God calls it to be. We practice discovering how we are interconnected to each other, God, and the whole of the cosmos in the Eucharist where we find a tangible experience of palpable grace—a place “where the brokenness of our lives and the world is transformed into a foretaste of the heavenly feast.”¹²⁸ At the Slate Project we have discerned that being church with a clean slate means returning again and again to the table of God to become what we receive—the Body of Christ for the Body of Christ.

The Baptismal Covenant

During our first three years of the Slate Project, we never explicitly named the baptismal covenant as the text that would ground our self-understanding as we lived out a new expression of being church. Yet looking back now, it *clearly* informed our understanding of the heart of what it means to be church. Before I discuss each question in the baptismal covenant and how the Slate Project community has come to view it as a core element of their slate, I will speak briefly about baptism in general as it pertains to the church’s self-understanding.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 89.

Baptism is the ritual ceremony where new members are formally brought into the church by being immersed in water or having water poured over them, solidifying the person's identity as a member of the church. The reformer John Calvin said that through baptism our very being is "ingrafted into Christ"¹²⁹ where henceforth we can be counted as children of God. While traditional baptismal theology considers the ritual of baptism to mark an individual's adoption as a child of God, New Testament scholar L. William Countryman argues it is also appropriate to view baptism as signifying "the gift" of belonging to God's family "bestowed at birth."¹³⁰ If all children, indeed all of creation, come from God and are a part of the life of God, then there is no moment of "adoption" when an individual is brought into the family of God. Rather, we are all born into the family of God and baptism is the ritual marking the arrival of a new member into the Body of Christ. As the Body of Christ, the church is a particular incarnation of those who participate in God's life by following Christ. This way, belief in Christ and membership in the Body does not necessitate the exclusion of non-Christians from the family of God, because there is room for inclusion within the life of God that is not contingent upon baptism or membership in the Body of Christ.

Christians believe the rite of baptism has the power to wash and cleanse the baptized person of their sins. The metaphor of "the slate" being "wiped clean" works well here. Just as it is inevitable that a baptized person will accrue sins after they have been baptized, once cleaned, our slates will accumulate elements that will need to be wiped off

¹²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: Arnold Hatfield for Bonham Norton, 1599), bk. 4, chap. 15, sec. 1; Center for Reformed Theology and Politics website, <http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/books/institutes/>.

¹³⁰ William L. Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1999), 193.

again. At the same time, there is a once-and-for-all aspect to baptism that understands our sins to have been forgiven once-and-for-all, and as such, our slate has been cleaned once-and-for-all.

Traditional views of baptism understand it to be a restoration of what it means to be truly human, where baptism recovers the humanity that God first intended and cleanses the baptized from what Augustine termed “original sin,” or the sin of our spiritual ancestors, Adam and Eve, passed down through the taint of sexual intimacy.¹³¹ Yet, there are other ways to view the meaning of baptism. Rather than a restoration to a full human identity that is located somewhere in the past, baptism can be viewed as a conscious inclusion into an evolutionary process where humanity is becoming all that it can be in the future. This idea is less about what God intended and more about what God intends, allowing for a metaphysics of hope beyond a regressive growth toward an ideal that presumably existed somewhere in the past. Instead the hope of the church is placed in a future new creation of ourselves that we join with God in co-creating, which Jesus called the Kingdom or Reign of God.

Rather than understanding baptism as the restoration of “human identity that has been forgotten or overlaid” that “takes us to where Jesus is,” we can view baptism as a renewal of human identity where our membership in the Body of Christ “takes us where Jesus is,” which is out ahead of us.¹³² When a person is baptized, they receive a new identity and a new life in Christ. If our unity and identity as followers of Christ lies only

¹³¹ See Augustine of Hippo, *Against Julian* 4.4.34, in *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, ed. Elizabeth Clark (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1996), 91.

¹³² Williams, *Being Christian*, 11.

in our relational, baptismal ties, then it takes the pressure off any supposed need for unification of belief, practice, or other mode of being, to constitute the church's identity.

Being brought into the life of the church involves being “joined to the Christian community's story and life of faith that calls for new loyalties.”¹³³ In their book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*, Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley describe the act of bringing a child to baptism as an act “filled with promise that the human mystery of a child and the divine mystery of grace will be united in a life of faithfulness that will not end in death.”¹³⁴ Because we have been forgiven we are to lead lives marked by forgiveness, and therefore, the church is called to be a community of forgiveness, accountability, and justice.

In the rite of Holy Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer the parents and godparents who speak on behalf of the child being baptized answer a series of questions beginning with: “Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?” to which they are invited to respond, “I will, with God's help.”¹³⁵ Then a series of questions follow, three describing what is “renounced” or turned away from as a part of living a Christian life, and three describing what is affirmed and toward which a Christian life is oriented. The sins and evils of the world that rebel against God are renounced, and promises to follow and trust in the grace and love of Jesus Christ are affirmed.

¹³³ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 65.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 302.

All those present who have been baptized are then invited to renew their own baptismal covenants. The first section affirms the credal beliefs about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit that have been passed down in the church since the early councils. These statements of belief are important, but they have been taken to be the heart of what it means to be a Christian and overshadowed the second half of the covenant, which is equally important. The second half illustrates the effect these beliefs should have on the life of those affirming them.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and turn to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?¹³⁶

I have already shown how the first question has played a role in the formulation of the life of the Slate Project and our decision to have a weekly, shared meal as the locus of our primary worship experience.

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and turn to the Lord?”¹³⁷ Jason Chesnut’s initial vision for the Slate Project can be summarized by the tag line “Christianity without the crap.” In the early days of the Slate Project, Jason would sit outside on the busy streets of Baltimore City and on hot days hand out free water, all the while sitting next to a sign reading “Christianity without the crap.” Most people’s reactions were instinctive—they either assumed they knew what he

¹³⁶ Ibid., 304-305.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 304.

meant and agreed with him, were offended by him, or they presumed not to know what he meant and took the time to engage him in conversation to learn what he meant by the phrase. When the Slate Project began to parse out this phrase as a community, it meant different things to each of us, but generally it had to do with the sense that the church has taught and done a lot of bad things over the course of its history and this continues in the present day—so “Christianity without the crap” is about naming that and changing that.

It is one thing for the church to be a place where patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, racism, xenophobia, colonialism, capitalism, ageism, ableism, and other forms of violence and oppression are not only experienced but seem to have been embedded in the institution itself. It is another thing for these sins to go unacknowledged, or to be acknowledged and then quickly ignored, as if grace and forgiveness did not go hand in hand with the work of relational and cultural healing. The church is a human institution and therefore will never be perfect. Even though many, including myself, have higher standards for the church than other institutions, we must also remember that we are just as fallible and in need of grace as everyone else. Church with a clean slate recognizes its dual role, as both the bearer of forgiveness and those in need of forgiveness.

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”¹³⁸

The Slate Project has committed itself to reclaiming the Bible as a story worth telling. In the last few decades, biblical literalism has been on the rise. One of the results has been the dismissal of the Bible as a text worth engaging by people who do not sit well with a literalist interpretation. The Slate Project has explored many different ways of engaging

¹³⁸ Ibid., 305.

the Bible including different methodologies, hermeneutics, and devotional practices. We often paraphrase Marcus Borg: We take the Bible seriously, not literally.¹³⁹ Our goal in engaging with Scripture is not uniformity of belief, interpretation, or practice, but rather to experience individually and as a community the transformative power of the Word of God and to *proclaim* that transformative story with our lives.

One of the reasons we do not have a traditional sermon when we gather, and why the teaching time is intentionally varied, is to allow anyone who feels called to proclaim and teach to feel comfortable doing so in their own way, with their own style. We have had biblical storytellers, visual artists, spoken word artists, musicians, and textile artists all proclaim the Good News of Christ through their own unique mediums. We also focus on learning and sharing ways to proclaim the Good News in all areas of our lives including our relationships with co-workers or strangers, on our social media pages, in public actions as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, and so on.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”¹⁴⁰ Jesus commandment to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves easily gains a place in the heart of the Slate Project. Seeing Christ in all persons has been a part of the church’s teachings for hundreds of years and most Christians can get behind the notion that we should see Christ in everyone we meet. But *seeking* and *serving* Christ in all persons requires another level of awareness and intentionality.

This is one area where my co-pastor Jennifer DeFrancesco continues to inspire and challenge me. She has deep love and passion for those who are without access to

¹³⁹ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001).

¹⁴⁰ The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 305.

permanent housing and/or are food insecure. She seeks out people most of us avoid, learning their names, listening to their life stories and helping them in whatever way she can. She is one of the only people I know who truly seeks and serves Christ in all people and her life is continually affected by this choice. She takes time out of her very busy schedule to reach out, to follow up, to provide. She treats each person as if they were a member of her family or one of her good friends, and helps them get what they need. Beyond that she sees them as children of God, not as a “homeless person” or “a person in need.”

Jenn gets frustrated when problems seem unsolvable or needs are not met. She experiences extreme joy from small victories like someone donating a new pair of work boots for a person who needs them. Or when a member of our community with difficult social and interpersonal issues finds a way to give of himself and give back to the wider group by bringing food to share for dinner. Jenn’s lived example has influenced Jason, me, and other members of our community who witness her love in action to take our love in action to the next level, whatever that means for us. Through witnessing the small acts of service we offer to each other, we encourage one another to continue to seek and serve Christ in all persons, because we see Christ in them.

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”¹⁴¹ The Slate Project did not intentionally set out to build our community to reflect the baptismal covenant, but in many ways, by the grace of God (and because this covenant has been repeatedly written on our hearts through ritual

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

participation in baptism) we did. There are so many things that people of varying beliefs and backgrounds can fight about. But all people who call themselves Christian should be able to agree that we are called to respect the dignity of every human being. Yet, in the public discourse of our nation this is not the model we see. When members of the church, or those who represent the institutional powers of the church, fail to respect the dignity of every human being, the church commits sin. This can happen unintentionally—the intent to disrespect may not be there, and yet the impact of disrespect is experienced. In these cases, we need the grace and humility to ask for forgiveness and to seek reconciliation and restoration. Too often egos or political agendas prevent us from admitting when we have done wrong. The simple act of admitting that we have caused harm to another, even unintentionally, is vital for sustaining healthy relationships, and living out this covenantal command.

Our experiment in being church with a clean slate has revealed to us that respecting the dignity of every human being must be part of the slate, as well as the striving for justice and peace among all people. Striving for justice and peace can almost seem easier because we know the distance between here and there is admittedly a long road. Sometimes the smaller, interpersonal work of respecting each other is easier to overlook, especially with all the ways to disrespect another person without having to look them in the face. From our outspoken support for the Black Lives Matter movement, to our policies against disrespectful tweets during our twitter chats, the Slate Project has tried to live into this promise, knowing we will fail and asking for forgiveness when we do.

Committing to being church with a clean slate involves committing to the relational promises outlined in the baptismal covenant. This means committing to an ongoing process of seeking to do our best to live out these promises, and when we fall short, confessing, repenting, and asking for forgiveness from God, each other, and even ourselves. The way of being church outlined in the baptismal covenant is a bold alternative to the way many people live their lives, even many Christians. Jesus sets a high standard for the church and the only way to come close to meeting it is with grace.

At the same time, our identity as members of the Body of Christ is not contingent upon how well we succeed at living out these promises. Our identity is predicated on God choosing to create us in God's image and God's choosing to claim us as God's own. From this identity as God's Beloved and within this covenantal relationship, the church is invited to respond to God's call to live out our identity and our relationships by committing to these promises, knowing we will only keep them "with God's help."¹⁴² In that way, God's help, or God's grace, is a core element of the slate—perhaps *the* core element of the slate. For the clean slate *is* grace, which I will discuss further in the next chapter.

In the context of prayer, engagement with Scripture, breaking bread at the table of God, and living out our baptismal covenant, the Slate Project has practiced being church with a clean slate. These are the core elements we identified as essential to the project of being church. When the church grounds our identity in these core elements, we engage in the practice of becoming who we are—a people of prayer, a people of story, a people of

¹⁴² Ibid.

hospitality, a people of covenant. These are not just things we *do*; these are expressions of who we *are*. This is not semantics; a group of people can perform all these acts and still not be the church. When we allow these practices to perform us, they transform us and our relationships, and we become the church. That is the difference between what the church does and who the church is. The Slate Project has endeavored to be a community where these core elements are the foundation of who we are.

Chapter Four

The Clean Slate as Grace

The Slate Project has used the metaphor of a “clean slate” to refer to a way of being church that engages in an ongoing process of letting go of anything that has proven harmful or is no longer useful to the project of being church, and then remembering the church’s communal identity by reimagining the core elements of what it means to be the church. We have established that the heart of ecclesiology is relationality—the church is who it is because of who God is: love in relationship. Trinitarian theology and a christology that allows for multiplicity ground an ecclesiology where the church’s identity is known through its relationship to God as God’s beloved, created in the image of God. Since God is love in relationship, the church as Christ’s Body in the world is called to be love in relationship.

The church is able to be love in relationship through the gift of grace. As Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne say in their book, *The Emerging Church*, “If there is real life in the Church it is always the gift of God.”¹⁴³ The Slate Project names that gift of God grace. “It wells up when God’s people are enabled by His [sic] Holy Spirit to discover again and again, both individually and corporately an authentic style of life which is relevant and contemporary, while rooted in the eternal good news of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁴ The Slate Project refers to this entire project as being church with a clean slate.

¹⁴³ Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne, *The Emerging Church* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1970), 140.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Ultimately, being church with a clean slate means living out the freedom God has given us, and continually gives us, to be love in Relationship. In her book *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Episcopal priest and womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas says: “To be created in the image of a God that is free means that the human person is meant to be free.”¹⁴⁵ Brown continues,

Simply put, to know the freedom of God is to know the life and love of God. In one respect, the love of God means that God freely chooses to free human beings from all that would deny them life in any way. In this regard, God loves people into freedom and thus into life. In another respect, freedom signifies the love and life of God. The point is, to know God is to know God as life, love, freedom at once. They are intertwined aspects of God. They reflect the very essence of God.¹⁴⁶

The Slate Project contends these qualities should reflect the very essence of the church.

Our freedom and our ability to discern and choose our future does not guarantee that we will choose love. We must vigilantly maintain and develop relationships of love if we are to discern how to be church with a clean slate in ways that express our true identity and call. How will we know if we are expressing our true identity and living life with a clean slate? According to those who have spent decades studying and practicing spiritual discernment, we must look for the signs of the Spirit, peace being the central sign.¹⁴⁷ The authors of *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, “Peace does not mean absence of trouble. Rather, it means a firm conviction, even in the midst of turmoil, that *the Lord is risen* and that ‘all shall be well.’”¹⁴⁸ In addition to peace, the authors identify the signs of the Spirit as

¹⁴⁵ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 151.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁴⁷ Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, *Listening Hearts*, 38-39.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

... a deep interior joy that is unselfconscious and uninhibited; a temporary experience of disorientation, followed by calm and serenity; tears that are comforting and tranquilizing, rather than disturbing and fatiguing; a sudden sense of clarity; strands of experience that seemed unrelated begin to converge and fit together; persistence—the message keeps recurring through different channels.¹⁴⁹

When the church has forgotten our identity as the beloved of God, we have forgotten to live from a graced place of freedom, and instead we have abandoned, forgotten, or corrupted our identity and our purpose. An example of this would be the destructive misuse use of the understanding of salvation. The Latin word *salvus*, from which our word “salvation” comes, means “‘whole,’ ‘sound,’ ‘healed,’ ‘safe,’ ‘well,’ or ‘unharm’d.’”¹⁵⁰ If the core elements of the church are baptismal and eucharistic living, prayer and a discerning engagement with Scripture, and “salvation” means “wholeness,” then the identity and purpose of the church would be to grow in relational wholeness with God, ourselves, each other, and all of creation.¹⁵¹

If Richard Rohr and the apostle Paul are correct, then “God is saving everything and everybody, it is all God’s emerging victory, until, as Paul says, ‘God will be all in all’ (1 Cor. 15:28).”¹⁵² Or as Diana Butler Bass puts it, “Salvation is not being saved from ourselves, escaping some dreadful fate of judgment, damnation, and hellfire at the hands of a wrathful God; rather, it is being saved *to ourselves*, finding what was lost and the joy of discovery in the hands of a loving Creator.”¹⁵³ Katharine Jefferts Schori says, “with Jesus’ Greatest Commandment—love God with all you are, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22: 36-40)—we receive the cosmic invitation to be in right

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 183.

¹⁵¹ Larson and Osborne, *The Emerging Church*, 154.

¹⁵² Rohr, “Bigger than Christianity.”

¹⁵³ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 182.

relationship with all.”¹⁵⁴ This invitation “sets out God’s intent for a reconciled and reconciling world,”¹⁵⁵ an intent which is passed on to the church.

Living with a clean slate means claiming the freedom we have been given to live a different kind of life—telling a different story. In this “alterative story,” Zscheile says

every human life is precious beyond measure, created for loving relationship with the source of all life. In this story, your worth is given, not earned. Rather than bearing the weight of making it up as you go, you find yourself in a common narrative that goes back many generations. You are welcomed into a community of unlike people where difference need not be a cause for division, as is so often the case in our world. You are offered forgiveness for your faults and errors, for the violence you do to others and this earth, and so are released to forgive others and break the cycle of hatred and retribution. You are claimed by a love and a power beyond your own. You are held in the arms of grace. And in that embrace, you are freed to participate in the restoration of human community and all creation.¹⁵⁶

Our worth is rooted in our identity as children of God; we are loved and we are enough *no matter what*. This is the essence of what it means to be given a clean slate, which God gives us time and time again. This is grace. However, we must accept it. The only reason we would not experience a clean slate is by not accepting it. Who we are determines what we do. We have been set free to love. Daniel Migliore says, we are free become partners with God in “the mending of creation,” and to join God in creating a world where “justice is cherished and where freedom, [life] and love flourish.”¹⁵⁷

The only one[JF1][SG2] who can give us a clean slate and wipe our slates clean is God. Redemption, forgiveness, and grace, and everything, ultimately, comes from God and happen in *God’s* time. In other words, these things take place now *and* are forever

¹⁵⁴ Schori, “The Episcopal Church: Forward into God’s Future,” 1.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 2.

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 246-247.

taking place in the “eternal now.” According to *our* time, we would be fools to think that we could just “wipe the slate clean.” Remembering who we truly are is only the beginning of the church’s work. In our experience with the Slate Project, asking “what if we had a clean slate for being the church?” was just the beginning of an unending process of discernment.

Letting Go or “Wiping the Slate Clean”

When we talk about “wiping the slate clean” we are speaking of a desire to name, learn from, work through, and ultimately let go of any elements of traditional and/or institutionalized Christianity that hinder the church’s ability to live as the beloved Body of Christ. Some examples of what we must “wipe off the slate” include patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, racism, institutional survival at the expense of following the gospel, perpetuating the status quo at the expense of serving the poor and marginalized, and maintaining power and control at the expense of proclaiming justice and freedom for the oppressed. In other words, to be church with a clean slate we must be willing to let go of anything and everything that keeps us from becoming who God is calling us to be.

Church with a clean slate practices what Laurel Schneider calls “*tehomic*” or “deep” theology which

... recognizes its own muddy retrievals, its mistakes; it begins again in *this* time, in the “ruins of the Absolute.” Such theology is patient. It is not afraid to own up to its mistakes and to being telling the story over again, in the middle of everything. Its method includes a willingness to continue to do so, to begin again, and always with a difference. This means that Christian theology in this time is historical theology to the extent that it has purchase in the given life and context of real people in real cultural circumstances, contexts that are not ever themselves pure; that have not themselves arisen *ex nihilo*.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008) 6.

The Slate Project was not interested in creating church *ex nihilo*, but rather thoughtfully and intentionally engaging in discernment to identify what aspects of being church should be kept and which should be let go. In the context of Jesus' life and ministry, Jesus let go or emptied himself "of anything that would compromise his absolute alliance with those of the crucified class,"¹⁵⁹ in other words the oppressed, marginalized, poor, disinherited, etc. He let go of anything that hindered his solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, the suffering. This is what some have called Jesus' *kenosis*, or "self-emptying." In an analogous way, the church is being called to a similar *kenosis*. Ultimately, our criteria for determining what to keep and what to let go of are discovered through our relationships with the triune God and with each other.

A key relational element here is control. What might it look like for the institutional church to let go of control? Episcopal Bishop Ian T. Douglas suggests that perhaps the best thing the institution can do is "limit their interference" in the relational work of the Spirit.¹⁶⁰ "This likely means scaling back centralized budgets and programs, eliminating regulations, flattening hierarchies, and loosening restrictions. It may mean suspending many rules until some new and more adequate pattern emerges."¹⁶¹ What if, instead of the establishment era of control, the church practiced "wide-spread permission

¹⁵⁹ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 177.

¹⁶⁰ Ian T. Douglas, "W(h)ither the National Church—Revisited: Changing Mission Structures of the Episcopal Church," in *What Shall We Become? The Future and Structure of the Episcopal Church*, ed. Winnie Varghese (New York: Church Publishing, 2013), 66.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

giving?”¹⁶² It would certainly change the nature of our relationships and help to foster mutuality and build trust.

Like most other institutions, the institutional church across denominations has operated under the modern assumption that the correct strategy will provide the ability to control any given environment and produce the desired outcomes. This is often done through subtle or overt manipulations of resources and influence.¹⁶³ A worldview which understands strategy and relationality in this way operates from a posture of perceived strength in order to re-create the world around them in order to serve their self-interests. Those it wishes to influence or engage are treated as consumers who have the ability to make personal choices and are enmeshed in systems that operate, largely it seems, out of their control. When the church understands relationships to function in this way it is no wonder people reject this paradigm as an inappropriate and inauthentic way of being church. Not only are these ways of being church not working (according to the measures of income, attendees, and power) they are not theologically defensible. Zscheile explains why:

To begin with, it stands at odds with how God comes to us in Christ—not as a controlling, managerial dictator or manipulator, but as a crucified messiah who shares our place. It represents a misunderstanding of the incarnational nature of our identity as the body of Christ. Moreover, it is also increasingly ineffective, especially among younger generations weary of being manipulated by marketers everywhere they turn. Churches who have embraced the consumerist paradigm often find that allegiances are fickle and commitment thin, and that it is very difficult to turn spiritual consumers into active disciples.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 30.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Only when the church has internalized God's gift of grace and the knowledge that we are forgiven and beloved of God, can we practice the radical forgiveness and love required of the Body of Christ. Jeffery C. Pugh rightly notes that "the awakening that comes with true knowledge of ourselves before God is never easy."¹⁶⁵ He goes on to beautifully describe what claiming a clean slate can do for a church's self-understanding.

[R]ealizing that we are accepted and embraced by that which lies at the boundary of all conceivable thought and will not let us go, we will find our most fundamental and truest selves. It is from here that we will be able to prophesy the words of grace and healing that a tired and exhausted world hopes to hear. Even more, it is here that the body of Christ will become incarnate in the world to live freely, unconstrained by the prior claims of social and personal illusion and unplugged from the matrix of false realities.¹⁶⁶

Practicing grace and forgiveness go against the sensibilities of the world. Yet, because they are the ways in which God relates to the world, they are the ways we are called to relate to the world as well.

Following the teachings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Miroslav Volf declares, "only those who are forgiven and who are willing to forgive will be capable of relentlessly pursuing justice without falling into temptation to pervert it into injustice."¹⁶⁷ Forgiveness allows us to step forward, with arms wide open, ready for an embrace, allowing the other to choose to step in and be rejoined in communion... or not. The only way out of the prison of exclusion is through re-centering ourselves in our identity as the Body of Christ where we are transformed in the image of the self-giving God and our will is freed to

¹⁶⁵ Pugh, *The Matrix of Faith*, 212.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 123.

“resist the power of exclusion in the power of the Spirit of embrace.”¹⁶⁸ By participating in the life of the triune God and dwelling in God’s embrace, we are transformed from those who exclude to those who embrace.

Practicing Grace

Grace is the heart of the slate. In other words, grace is what holds the center and connects all the elements of what it means to be church. Grace can be defined simply as a free gift from God that helps humanity to “be *reunited* with God after a period of separation.”¹⁶⁹ Additionally, grace can be understood as the power of the Holy Spirit working through us to reunite us to God and restore our true identity. Grace is what grounds us and frees us in our relationships and therefore in our identity as the church.

The Slate Project proposes an understanding of Christ where Jesus sets humanity free to follow him by bringing us back into right relationship with God, ourselves, each other, and all of creation. Through relationship with Jesus we are remembered into the Body of Christ and invited to participate in the life of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“Even though grace is a free gift from God, it still demands that we be transformed by it. God’s never-ending supply of grace is always there for the taking, but we still must decide to take it.”¹⁷⁰ God is continually offering us a clean slate, but we must use it. Grace comes with an invitation to discipleship, to following Jesus and to being transformed. Grace without discipleship is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 92.

¹⁶⁹ Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 24.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 27.

grace,” which “is the deadly enemy of our Church...grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹⁷¹ Any understanding of cheap grace must be “wiped off the slate,” leaving only the transformational grace revealed through the incarnation and within mutual relationships of love.

Noted preacher, writer, and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor has argued that “sin-talk” is precisely what allows us to move toward “grace-talk.”¹⁷² While there is not room here to lay out all the many ways for thinking about sin that have been developed over the years, it is worth noting that traditionally sin has been understood “not just as an act, but also as a condition.”¹⁷³ Most simply defined, sin can be understood as a separation from God. Thanks to Augustine of Hippo’s doctrine of original sin, when many people hear the word “sin” they think of sexually sinful acts. The notion that humanity is tainted with an inherited sinful state thanks to our “first parents” Adam and Eve has worked its way deep into the slate; yet it does not need to be, nor should it be a core teaching of the church. There are other ways to avoid the Pelagian heresy that humans are capable of saving themselves without arguing for humanity’s inherently sinful nature or creating such a negative view of sexuality.

Understood as a separation from God, sin creates a fracture in our relationships and in our self-understanding. Sin can “manifest itself in many forms and in many different contexts.”¹⁷⁴ The Slate Project gives priority to the relational elements of those forms and contexts. “From a traditional theological perspective, grace is unearned

¹⁷¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 43-45.

¹⁷² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2000).

¹⁷³ Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 15.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

because we are all held captive by original sin.”¹⁷⁵ This is a perversion of grace. Grace is unearned because God gives it freely and with love. There is nothing we can do to earn God’s grace because there is nothing to *do*—being grace-full in relationship is essentially who God is.

The metaphor of being church with a clean slate has allowed the Slate Project community to imagine and reimagine what it might look like to be a church whose existence is completely informed by grace. The only reason for the Slate Project’s existence is a response to God’s relational gift of grace. This is, in fact, the only reason for any church’s existence as well as its reason for being. A return to grace as the foundation for existence as well as our purpose allows the church to let everything else go except the essentials, the core of the slate. In this way, the Slate Project has proved not only a fruitful exercise in being church, but a test case for reimagining the church’s identity through using the metaphor of a clean slate.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 26.

Chapter Five

Looking Back, Looking Forward

The Discernment Process Goes On

In her book, *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, Diana Butler Bass suggests that discontent with the current state of the church can be viewed as a gift, because “discontent is the beginning of change.”¹⁷⁶ It is only “by noticing what is wrong, seeing the systems and structures that do not foster health and happiness”¹⁷⁷ that we become uncomfortable enough to choose to change. Bass says discontent is “one short step” from longing.¹⁷⁸ The Slate Project has been a place for people both inside and outside traditional church institutions to express both their discontent with how things are and their longing for the church to be something better. We at the Slate Project have tried to help one another move from discontent to longing, and then from longing to *the next* step—trying out and trying on different ways of being church.

Looking back over the last four years, there have been certain steps along the way that we have returned to again and again. As we have attempted to live out our calling to be church with a clean slate we engaged in a process that I have come to identify as a transformational spiral. This process initially began with prayer and discernment (between the three co-pastors) grounded in communal engagement with Scripture. Then after a period of listening to one another, and to God, we looked for signs of the Spirit in

¹⁷⁶ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 84.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

order to discern our next step. We waited until everyone involved in the decision came to a sense of consensus around the issue we were discerning before taking any action. This did not mean that we all agreed, but it did mean that no one disagreed to the point of feeling uncomfortable going forward in the direction the group discerned.

The following step was to take some sort of action in line with what the community had discerned. After acting, we gathered together again as a group to reflect on how we perceived the action to have gone, evaluating the action in terms of whether it moved our community forward in the direction toward which we discerned the Spirit calling us. This time of evaluation then led us back to prayer and discernment, and the cycle repeated itself. The steps in this process repeated themselves and yet we were always in a different place each time we engaged a new step in the process. We were continually moving forward and going deeper into our embodiment of the community we believed God was calling us to be, hence the description of this process as a spiral rather than a circle.

Maintaining this kind of transformational cycle and keeping the spiral moving forward is not easy. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook and Frederick Harris Thompsett note that there are “four traps into which individuals or congregations may fall along the way... illusion, panic, exhaustion, and stagnation.”¹⁷⁹ As we started our fourth year, the Slate Project leadership fell into a trap that could be described as a combination of exhaustion and stagnation, particularly around our weekly worship gathering.

¹⁷⁹ Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Frederica Harris Thompsett, *Born of Water, Born of Spirit: Supporting the Ministry of the Baptized in Small Congregation*, (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 153.

In BreakingBread we had created a new way of gathering face-to-face every week that was working quite well. We had grounded our liturgical actions in prayer, discerning engagement with Scripture, the breaking and sharing of the bread in Jesus name, and a commitment to living out the values of the baptismal covenant. We had created new rituals that spoke to people and made them feel part of a church community they had been longing for. Once we started to average 25-30 people a week, we expanded our leadership circle from the three co-pastors to include nine others, creating a larger team of oversight we called “the Round Table.” This group covenanted to meet together once a month to pray and discern how God was calling our community forward.¹⁸⁰

As we began our third year (the final year of guaranteed funding from the initial parish sponsor) several opportunities for possible partnerships with other local ministry organizations presented themselves to us. The Round Table spent an extensive amount of time and energy discerning and praying together about whether any of these possible partnerships would be a good fit with our developing mission and vision for the Slate Project. Ultimately, the Round Table discerned that we were not being called to partner with any of these organizations at that time. While we felt confident we had made the right decision, we felt tired and worn out by the ups and downs of potential possibilities followed by decisions to turn down these opportunities. After saying “no” to so many options, we felt discouraged to not yet know what we were being called to say “yes” to next.

¹⁸⁰ The Round Table particularly focused on the face-to-face community of BreakingBread.

Another factor in the frustration and stagnation the co-pastors were feeling was the realization that while we had done our best to invite others into leadership roles within the BreakingBread community, the three of us had taken on the majority of the responsibilities for the work that went into making BreakingBread happen each week. After three years, we had let ourselves become complacent. Instead of continually engaging in the transformative cycle of praying, discerning, trying new things out and then reflecting on how they worked within BreakingBread, we fell into our own status quo.

At the same time, each of our three denominational bodies was asking the Slate Project leadership questions about our ministry plans to sustain ourselves over the next three to five years. What they envisioned for us and the answers they wanted from us were based on traditional understandings of what being a church congregation or mission meant from their particular denominational standpoints. Hence, we found ourselves putting the majority of our energy too far out into the future, asking ourselves how we were going to survive rather than how we were going to *be*. We had lost our focus on what made us who we are and what we had initially done so well— what one of our Round Table members referred to as our ability to be “*the church of the now*.”¹⁸¹

It felt as if we were losing our way, our moorings, our unique *identity*—but at that time we could not admit this to ourselves. We had started to forget who we were because we had gotten so caught up in trying to figure out how to be something that our denominations would support rather than following the unpredictable, spirit-filled

¹⁸¹ Julie Stecker used this phrase at a Round Table discernment retreat to describe what she perceived to be what the Slate Project was creating when we were thoroughly engaged in the transformational spiral cycle.

presence of God, step by step, day by day. BreakingBread had become “successful” and I, personally, no longer found joy in it. It was feeding the people who were coming (physically and spiritually—which was wonderful and important) but we had become more like a consumer driven church than we ever intended to be. We spent more time creating and providing a spiritual experience of community *for* people, than we spent engaging them in process of co-creating a new kind of church. When we stopped to reflect on how things were going (re-engaging the transformational spiral process) we realized that we were missing the mark of our calling. It was time for us to change, again. But before we could discern what “new thing” we were going to become, we had to discern what “old thing” we were being called to let go.

After our leadership team discerned that we were not being called to a partnership with a parish in the Diocese of Maryland that the Bishop very much supported, we found ourselves at an impasse. We did not know what was next and the Round Table felt discouraged. I suggested that we take a sabbatical from what had become normal for us—which in our case was our weekly BreakingBread gathering— and allow ourselves the time and space to see what might need to die and so something new could be born. Not everyone thought this was the right thing to do. We talked about it and prayed about it and still not everyone agreed. But no one *disagreed* to the point that they would not support the decision the majority of the Round Table supported. We decided to take a “Sabbath” break from BreakingBread for six weeks and start up again with the season of Advent.

During this fallow time, new and unexpected ministries began to grow. Each of the three co-pastors were called to some form of new ministry. Jenn was called to take on more of a leadership role for the face-to-face BreakingBread community as they re-discovered who God was calling them to be as a community *now*. Jason was called to start his own film company, Ankos Films, and to work part-time with the Slate Project, focusing on continuing to create unique, digital content and build up our online community. And I was called to a new community all together, accepting a call to serve as a chaplain at an independent Episcopal School. This meant that I would transition from my role as co-pastor of the Slate Project and eventually form a whole new relationship with the community, not as one of its leaders, but still as a supporter.

Death and New Life

This time of transition was both fruitful and painful. It has been a tremendous learning experience, for we are cycling through the transformational process on a grand scale once again, discerning what it means for us to be church with a clean slate *now*. What we know in our heads we are learning, once again, in our hearts—the spiral cycle of transformation and growth always includes death and new life; grief is always a part of death; there can be both joy and gratitude in death, for in order for something new to be born, something has to die. Spiraling through the transformation cycle means accepting where we are each step along the way and letting the whole process transform us.

There are aspects of the “new thing” we created with the Slate Project that are coming to an end and parts of it that are being made new. Being true to the process of becoming church with a clean slate means it could not be any other way—for the Slate

Project and for the wider church. The “mighty upheaval” of the institutional church could very well be God calling us to reimagine and remember who we are and who we are being called to be.

In *The Great Emergence*, Phillis Tickle says that every period of religious reimagining in history produces (at least) three results. “First, a new, more vital form of Christianity does indeed emerge.”¹⁸² “Second,” Tickle says, “the organized expression of Christianity which up until then had been the dominant one is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self,”¹⁸³ resulting, essentially in *two* new creations. The Slate Project can claim a place of influence in both spheres—as midwives of “a brand-new expression of its faith and practice”¹⁸⁴ for the church in the twenty-first century, and as refurbishers of the older, more traditional institutional church. There has been room within the Slate Project for individuals and communities who consider themselves a part of these each of these two new creatures that make up the church as it is coming into being today.

Finally, Tickle speaks of a third result of religious upheaval that has equal if not greater significance than first two...

... every time the incrustations of an overly established Christianity have been broken open, the faith has spread—and been spread—dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach as a result of its time of unease and distress.¹⁸⁵

The Slate Project’s unique presence can definitely be said to have helped increase the “range and depth of Christianity’s reach” during this otherwise uneasy and distressful

¹⁸² Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 17.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

time in for churches in the United States. Becoming church with a clean slate is a process that will exceed our individual lifetimes in which the church *is becoming* the redeemed Body of Christ.

Henri Nouwen put it this way:

And yet you are Christian only so long as you look forward to a new world, so long as you constantly pose critical questions to the society you live in, so long as you emphasize the need of both conversion for yourself and for the world, so long as you in no way let yourself become established in a situation of calm, so long as you stay unsatisfied with the status quo and keep saying that a new world is yet to come. You are a Christian only when you believe that you have a role to play in the realization of this new kingdom, and when you urge everyone you meet with a holy unrest to make haste so that the promise might soon be fulfilled. So long as you live as a Christian you keep looking for a new order, a new structure, a new life.¹⁸⁶

The moment when a community asks themselves, “What if we had a clean slate for being church?” is a *kairos* moment. It is a moment when God invites the church into a new way of understanding and experiencing our identity and relationships with ourselves, with each other, with God, and all of creation. When we reflect on what it means to be the church in this way, we open ourselves to new encounters with God in our search for who God is calling us to be by practicing living into our incarnate roles as “embodied spirits, inspirited bodies,”¹⁸⁷ individually and collectively.

Being church with a clean slate means asking God to reveal God’s self to us again and again, and help us to perceive God’s response to our longings. Being church with a clean slate means trusting that we have been given and will continue to be given God’s grace which will transform us and guide us in our becoming the Body of Christ. This is

¹⁸⁶ Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 126.

¹⁸⁷ Farley, *Just Love*, 117.

what being in Christ means—our relationships form the foundation of our identity, the structure of our belonging, and the container for our growth in God in Christ.

The reality that being a part of a “church is no longer membership in an institution, but a journey toward the possibility of a relationship with people, a community, a tradition, a sacred space, and, of course, God”¹⁸⁸ is becoming more widely understood. In this time of great division and increasing normalization of violence (physical, rhetorical, emotional) in our culture, “God is calling us to a new way of being with one another and with God. We are being called to write a new history.”¹⁸⁹ Rather than walking away from the church that has been a place of alienation and wounding for many, we must remember and reimagine the church that has also been the bearer of the story of Jesus Christ and the good news of God’s love. As the church reimagines and reclaims our identity as a death and resurrection people, God invites us to become who we truly are—a people who are never finished changing, a people who are always being made new, a people whose identity is always found in losing their lives so God might save us, a people who are completely and only oriented toward love. In this way, “rather than inhabiting the modern narrative of liner progress, we can live more deeply into the core story of our tradition—death and resurrection.”¹⁹⁰

By choosing to let go of everything that is not central to the core of being church, the Slate Project invites the church to refocus its life around the primary work of remembering and reimagining what it means to follow Jesus in a twenty-first century

¹⁸⁸ Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 192.

¹⁸⁹ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 208.

¹⁹⁰ Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 41.

world.¹⁹¹ We “may wish to mourn the loss of what was, but there is no need to fear what will be, for the future is here only in part, and there is much work to be done. We can make a new way of faith.”¹⁹² Making a new way, doing a new thing will require courage, accountability, self-awareness, trust, vulnerability, and hope in each of our relationships. It will require not only being comfortable with not knowing what comes next, but giving each other the space and the time to dwell in the not knowing. For it is in the not knowing where possibility resides and creativity takes shape. Within this not knowing is where God invites the church to co-create something new.

¹⁹¹ Zscheile, “From Establishment to Innovation,” 62.

¹⁹² Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 268.

Conclusion

The Slate Project was and is an experiment; it is the manifestation of a desire for the church to be a deeper, truer incarnation of what God intends it to be. It began with a question: “What if we had a clean slate for being the church?” This metaphor has served our particular community well and freed us to imagine *what could be*, rather than focusing on what is not or what cannot be.

The slate is not and never will be blank, nor should it be. Discerning what is core to the slate was a big part of the process of our becoming. For the Slate Project, we discerned that prayer, engagement with Holy Scripture, participation in the Holy Eucharist, and living out the baptismal covenant in community, were central to what it means to be the church. Therefore, these were the core elements we identified as foundational to our new community’s identity and practice. I have argued that these four elements can and perhaps should be considered core to any church community’s slate.

The only way we could discern who we were called to be as the church was in and through our relationship with God. Who the church is called to be is directly related to whom we experience God to be through our relationships with God, ourselves, each other, and all of creation. For the Slate Project this meant embracing a christology of multiplicity and a relational trinitarian theology. Because we know Christ to be Liberator, Subvertor, Interconnected, and Vulnerable, we as church were called to take those christological characteristics into ourselves and embody them in our context. Because we know God to be triune and relational, a trinitarian relational theology undergirds all that

we undertake to do and be. These christological and trinitarian characteristics of God also necessitate that our understanding of our identity make room for multiplicity. This means there is no one way to be church! Rather *becoming church* is an ongoing process that we continue to spiral through throughout our lives, continually dying to old ways of being and transforming into new creations.

Beyond the particular ministries we have begun and initiatives we have undertaken, I view the larger ministry of the Slate Project to be engaging with and encouraging a movement of transformed Christians and Christian communities who are committed to doing the work of looking at how they have gotten to where they are now, discerning who it is God is calling them to be, identifying what is keeping them from being who they are called to be, working through patterns of behavior and beliefs that keep them stuck, learning new ways to communicate with one another, engaging, showing up, being present, rising after falling, working through tension and conflict, and doing it all again and again to be transformed in their relationships with themselves, with each other, with God, and with all of creation.

Being church with a clean slate means stepping out into the arena of the unknown and being present the way we believe God is calling us to be present, with courage and with vulnerability. Being church in this way is a “far more exciting, risky, adventurous, and transformational path than simply doing what we’ve always done.”¹⁹³ The question, “what if we had a clean slate for being the church” cannot be answered by this thesis or by any one community or project. Rather, as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke says, the

¹⁹³ Zscheile, *People of the Way*, 41.

answers emerge in our hearts as we live the questions.¹⁹⁴ Being church with a clean slate is not so much about figuring out what to do or who to be in any final or absolute sense, but participating in relationships that are being transformed by the grace the clean slate provides.

In the end, we return to where we began—longing and prayer. The prayer attributed to Thomas Merton (adapted by Listening Hearts Ministries to be prayed communally) sums up the heart of the prayer and the longing of the Slate Project.

Therefore, it is fitting to end with these words, in order to make room within ourselves for the Spirit to lead us toward what is to come.

God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will, does not mean we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore, we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.¹⁹⁵

Let it be so.

¹⁹⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 21.

¹⁹⁵ Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, *Listening Hearts*, 167.

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